

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media

Issue 35

April 1990

Source: ejumpcut.org

Jump Cut was founded as a print publication by John Hess, Chuck Kleinhans, and Julia Lesage in Bloomington, Indiana, and published its first issue in 1974. It was conceived as an alternative publication of media criticism—emphasizing left, feminist, and LGBTQ perspectives. It evolved into an online publication in 2001, bringing all its back issues with it.

This electronic version was created with the approval of the *Jump Cut* editors and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License.

Table of Contents

Jump Cut, No. 35, April 1990

Female address on music television by Lisa A. Lewis
Sexual representation: introduction by the Editors
On pornographic cinema by Gertrud Koch, trans. Jan-Christopher Horak
Ganja and Hess by Manthia Diawara and Phyllis Klotman
El Brigadista by John Ramirez
The hypothetical lesbian heroine by Chris Straayer
Women in Hollywood musicals by Martin Roth
The IBM tramp by Stephen Papon
Power and Paranoia reviewed by Tony Williams
Labor and electronic cinema by Michael Nielsen
Down And Out in Beverly Hills. Rocky IV. Aliens by Christine Holmlund
Diary for My Loves. '68 by Steven Kovács
Fassbinder's Brechtian aesthetics by H-B. Moeller
The Last Temptation of Christ by Lisa DiCaprio
Films of Patricia Gruben by Kathleen McHugh
Watsonville on Strike by Geoffrey Dunn
Arts censorship by the Editors
World in change by the Editors

To navigate:

Other than the table of contents the links inside a PDF are active.

Use the bookmarks to the left on a PDF file. If they don't appear click the small ribbon icon on the left edge.

Search by using ctrl-F (PC) or command-F (Mac). Clicking "Edit" on the top ribbon will bring up a menu that also has a find function (PC or Mac).

If you're on the Archive website then use the "Search inside" field at the top right.

Other options are available for different types of files.

Female address on music television Being discovered

by Lisa A. Lewis

from *Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, pp. 2-15

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1990, 2006

Since MTV began broadcasting in 1981, both popular and academic critics writing about music television have insistently raised the issue of MTV's sexism.^[1] [\[open notes in new window\]](#) Indeed, a "jump on the bandwagon" critical momentum has fashioned that assertion of sexism into a basic analytical assumption. Although the charge of sexism rightly foregrounds issues of textual politics, critics too frequently treat MTV as a monolithic textual system and sexism as a static, ahistorical mode of representation written into media texts.

Music video does bring together two cultural forms which have notoriously promulgated female objectification — rock music and televisual imagery. Critics can certainly bring up specific examples to justify such claims — such as women in chains or cages, strewn across sets in skimpy leather outfits. But if criticism focuses exclusively on sexist representations in male-addressed videos, it will overlook how numerous videos have emerged which are produced to songs sung by female musicians and it will ignore these videos' enormous popularity among female fans.

MTV'S ROLE IN THE RISE OF FEMALE MUSICIANSHIP

In the years leading up to the start of music video promotion, female rock musicians had struggled for recognition both as vocalists (the traditional female niche) and as instrumentalists and composers.^[2] The contemporary women's movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s provided momentum for change, as did the early punk movement in Britain at the end of the 1970s. Although punk emerged essentially as a working-class male subculture, Hebdige (1983) makes the point that punk included a minority of female participants who aggressively tried to carve out a specifically female form of expression. On the punk scene, women musicians offered a sharp contrast to the way subcultures usually subsume women phallogcentrically:

"Punk propelled girls onto the stage and once there, as musicians and singers, they systematically transgressed the codes governing female performance ... These performers have opened up a new space for women as active participators in the production of popular music" (p.83-85).

Punk's advocacy of "defiant amateurism" (Swartley, 1982, p. 28) elevated the devalued status of the amateur musician, in the process granting women unprecedented access to musical information and audiences. The start of MTV represents another conjuncture of female pop and rock musicianship. The channel established a music video format and distribution mechanism; and these provided female musicians with an opportunity to gain industry backing, assert their subjective vision within the videos, and build audience recognition.

Under the capitalist economic system that operates rock and roll as an entrepreneurial enterprise, getting a record company contract largely defines professional musicians' goals. Most rock musicians, women included, aspire to gaining the largest audiences and the financial backing to produce and promote their music. For that, musicians look to commercial distribution.

In 1979, just when new female musicians were preparing to break into the music scene, the U.S. recording industry had gone into a tailspin. This was due to the combined effects of a sluggish economy, home-taping, and diversification of the home entertainment market. The years 1976 to 1978 had been boom years for record companies, but 1979 became known as "the year of the Platinum Goose's downfall" (Sutherland, 1980, p. 96). Any individual or group without a proven track record, which especially applied to women musicians, had a hard time obtaining a record company contract, that essential step in finding a large audience. The difficulty of getting a contract began to change, however, in the summer of 1981 with the introduction of music video programming.[\[3\]](#)

Six weeks after MTV went on the air in selected test markets like Tulsa, Wichita, Peoria, Syracuse, Grand Rapids, and Houston, record sales rose for certain musical artists getting heavy play on the channel. Retailers in these areas received requests for music which had not had radio airplay in their communities. By 1983, a Nielsen survey commissioned by MTV owner, Warner-Amex, showed MTV to be influencing 63% of its viewers to buy certain albums.

For every nine albums bought by MTV viewers, four purchases could be directly attributed to the viewing of the record- company-produced music videos (Levy, 1983, p. 34). Lee Eband, vice-president of Polygram Records, one of the companies originally reticent about turning over free copies of music video tapes to MTV, admitted that the cable channel had proven "the most powerful selling tool we've ever had" (Levy, 1983, p.78). Album and singles sales rose to all time highs, in some cases surpassing industry sales records. As a result, record companies renewed financing for new and unknown bands and vocalists, women musicians included.

In 1982, the Go-Gos became the only all-female vocal and instrumental group ever to make the top 10. Their first album, "Beauty and the Beat," also became the first album by an all-women rock band to hit number one on the charts. Cyndi Lauper's debut album, "She's So Unusual," remained in the top 30 for 60+ weeks, selling close to 4 million copies in the U.S. alone. That album produced four Top 5 hit singles, a new record for a female singer.

Madonna sold 3.5 million copies of her album, "Like a Virgin," in just 14 weeks. Her album was "triple platinum" before its artist had even set foot on a touring stage. By 1985, "Like a Virgin" became the first album by a female artist to be

certified by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) for sales of five million units. The 1985 winner of the top Grammy award, Tina Turner, had no record deal one year but a top hit single the next. Her album, "Private Dancer" has sold ten million copies around the world. Pat Benatar, Chaka Khan, and the Pointer Sisters all reached a million in sales with albums promoted by music video.[\[4\]](#)

When musicians enter the world of professional musicianship, they do not necessarily receive an invitation to create the music of their choice. Musicians who work within the record industry constantly negotiate contradictory roles. They work both as self-expressing artists and as paid workers within an industrial mode of production. Additionally, female rock musicians contend with their subordinate position as female social subjects; their promotion remains tied to sexist standards of representation and musical niches. When music video gained ascendancy as a promotional vehicle and as a final stage in the song production process, however, this new form suggested certain strategies whereby female musicians could expand their struggle for authorship over both their image and their music.

MTV music video commonly uses two formal devices — a pre-recorded popular music song and the musicians' appearing in on-screen roles. Most conventionally, vocalists lip synch the song's lyrics while visually we see them featured as musical performers. Sometimes they also act in the video's narrative.

Female musicians' traditional musical role as vocalist gets turned into an asset in music video promotion. In their desire to broaden the spectrum of female musicianship, feminist critics have sometimes criticized the vocalist niche. However, in music video the prerogative rests most squarely on the vocalist. In narrative videos, the lyrics provided by the female vocalist can operate like a narrator's omnipotent voice-over to guide the visual action.

Commonly a selected lyrical phrase is lip synched as if it were dialogue. With this device, sometimes the female vocalist manages literally to put words in other characters' (sometimes male) mouths. In Cyndi Lauper's first MTV video, GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN, the burly ex-wrestler Lou Albano, as Lauper's father, lip synchs Cyndi's lyric, "What you gonna do with your life?"; at this point, she pins his arm behind his back in a wrestling maneuver. To replace the father's scolding voice with the daughter's parodies and undermines the father's authority and by symbolic extension, patriarchy[\[5\]](#) itself.

When musicians appear visually in music videos, the video format allows them a greater range of performance than that does the concert stage. Eye contact and facial gestures seen only by a few concert-goers become equally accessible to video viewers. Role-playing is limited on the stage to costuming changes and the use of props. It can be intricately elaborated in music video through location shooting, use of sets, and interactions between musicians and actors. In other words, musicians in music video now can use the gamut of devices available to television producers. Many female musicians have proven adept at manipulating the visual elements of performance, utilizing music video's formal characteristics as authorship tools.

Cyndi Lauper was one of the first female musicians to achieve mass popularity as a direct result of her exposure on MTV. GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN, released on MTV in 1983, resulted from an intricate set of initiatives Lauper

designed to create a woman-identified image for herself and her music. When Lauper's producer, Rick Chertoff, first suggested Lauper sing Robert Hazard's "Girl's Just Want To Have Fun," she found the lyrics sexist and refused to consider the piece:"

"...he played me 'Girls...' and I said, 'Well, I ain't doing THAT song' ... because it wasn't what it ended up to be — which is something that I'll never forget that Rick did for me. I was so headstrong and so set. It was basically a very chauvinistic song. He said, 'But wait, think about what it COULD mean, just think about it for a minute, forget all this other stuff, and think about what it could mean.' I said, 'Well, how could I do that? Look at this and look at that.' He said, 'So change it.'" (Meldrum Tapes, 1986)

Hazard's original lyrics had offered only an inflated male fantasy of female desire:

My father says, "My son,
what do they want from your life?"
I say, "Father, dear,
we are the fortunate ones.
Girls just want to have fun."

But Lauper altered the lyrics to make them a custom-made vehicle by which she could express her views on female inequality:

My mother says,
"When you gonna live your life right?"
"Oh, Mother, dear,
we're not the fortunate ones.
And girls just want to have fun."

The video's design affirmed the way Lauper appropriated Hazard's song. The change subsequently became the cornerstone for the video narrative. Lauper even had her own mother play a leading role. She used the video as a means of extending her authorship, and her mother's appearance encouraged an autobiographical interpretation of the lyrics.

On Lauper's album, Hazard receives songwriting credit, an indication he was duly compensated. In the informal notes Lauper includes in the album's jacket, she thanks Hazard "for letting me change your song." Essentially, Lauper traded in "owning" the song for the right to be its author. As it turns out, her commercial success translated into dollars down the line. Hazard was put in the somewhat embarrassing, although financially rewarding, position of accumulating royalties from the sale of a song which no longer spoke his creative vision. He maintains ownership, but is robbed of authorship. While songwriters often remain all but invisible in the wake of a vocalist's rendition, the case of "Girls" represents an extraordinarily political intervention by Lauper, one which clearly worked to her benefit.

Lauper also participated in producing the video, although she did not officially direct it. In Shore's (1984) day-by-day account of the making of the video, Lauper's name appears over and over as a contributor at virtually every stage of production.

It is "Cyndi" who picks the video's producer, Ken Walz, and director, Ed Griles. She based that decision on her prior experience of working with them on videos for her first (commercially unsuccessful) band, Blue Angel. "Cyndi" suggests the video's concept, picks location sites in New York City, brings in choreographer Mary Ellen Strom and finds extras to appear in the video. The construction workers, who serve as pivotal symbols in the video's snake-dance sequence, were actual workers that Lauper coaxed into the on-camera action. Shore (1984) describes her coaching of the other passers-by she drew into the scene:

"Cyndi, who appears to be doing as much directing as Griles or anyone else, runs them through their paces several times while waiting for the new chorus-line members to return to the location" (Shore, 1984, p. 171).

As the account eloquently demonstrates, the usual cinematic division of labor suggested by the official title of "director" did not preclude Lauper's collaborative accomplishments.

Shore's (1984) story of Lauper's involvement in the shoot continues. "Cyndi" suggests the antique boutiques where campy items used in the creation of interior sets were purchased. She spends hours splatter-painting furniture for the bedroom scene. Her input even extends to post-production work, as she screens rushes, approves the rough cut, and checks in on the progress of the time-consuming special effect that appears midway through the video.

In his diary-like chronicle, Shore (1984) is attentive to Lauper's many initiatives and interventions, and he even includes snatches of interviews that allow her to voice her intentions:

"Finally, there is the artist herself: Cyndi is not just a pretty face onstage, a pretty voice on record. She's an experienced actress as well ... Cyndi plays an unusually large creative role in the conceptualizing and staging of the video itself, from start to finish ... says Cyndi ... "I know what I want and don't want — I don't want to be portrayed as just another sex symbol" (p. 167).

Lauper has a vital self-consciousness about representation. She has proven her ability to use visual language to overturn staid images, create song authorship, and build a musical career. Her taking charge of the video idiom indicates new directions for female musicianship and the important role played here by music video.

MTV has also facilitated different, new relations between female musicians and female audiences. The distribution of music video into cable-wired homes has created a domestic outlet for musical promotion. Prior to the advent of MTV, rock musicians had mainly depended on the concert tour for promotion, and going to rock concerts was overwhelmingly identified as a male adolescent cultural activity. As MTV promoted musicians on its home-based television distribution channel, it brought musicians a larger female audience and helped sponsored female entry to concerts. According to Pat Benatar, who performed on concert stages both before and after the start of MTV, a clear shift in female concert attendance occurred once MTV began distributing her image into the home:

"When we first began, most of our concerts were probably 80/20 male-oriented. There were very few women. Very few women used to go to concerts no matter who was playing, male or female. I saw that really change about 1982. It became like 60/40, and the next thing I knew, it was 50/50, then 60/40 the other way. Now there are more women in the audience than men" (Benatar, 1987).

The opportunity to build a female audience through music video promotion was seized by female musicians as an occasion to develop an address to girls and women.

CULTURAL CONTRADICTIONS IN MTV'S TEXTUAL ADDRESS

Although the formal characteristics of music video and its distribution on MTV enhanced female musicians' authorship, it is to the credit of female musicians such as Lauper and Benatar that MTV became a touchstone for female address. Overall, the textual system of address developed by MTV did not accommodate the rising number of female musicians' need for a vehicle for self-representation, nor was the channel geared to female audiences. By the time *GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN* played on MTV in 1983, the channel's system of discourse had largely solidified around representing male adolescent experiences and desires.

MTV specifically resulted from market studies based on demographic thinking (Marc, 1984). It was conceived with a specific target audience in mind, the broadly stated age group of 12-34 year olds (Wolfe, 1983). In translating its perception of youth into a textual address, MTV chose the path, not surprisingly, of reproducing the culturally salient and ideological category "adolescence."

Hudson (1984) describes adolescence as a system of discourse which fundamentally incorporates the assumptions and definitions of *male* experience, activity, and desire. The attitudes and practices typically associated with adolescence include socially sanctioned retreats from parental surveillance and domestic constrictions, aggressive leisure practices and associated peer activities, pursuit of sexual experiences, and experimenting with social roles and norms. Such activities help boys assume their position in patriarchy. Adolescence and masculinity are ideologically united to support the social system of male privilege. The social authorization of adolescent license remains tied to gender and does not fully extend to girls.

Textually, MTV enacts male adolescent discourse through a broad system of images that evokes boys' privileged position both in relation to their female adolescent peers and to the adult male role. Symbolic representations of adolescent boy culture celebrate the distinctiveness of male adolescence by depicting boys' distinct peer relations, leisure activities, sexual fantasies, and on occasion, contradictory experiences. Towards this end, music video uses the image of the street as an overarching sign system. Male musicians are shown loitering on sidewalks, strolling along avenues, and traveling in cars, in keeping with male youths' attachment to the street. The visual representation of street corner activities valorizes leisure, the arena in which adolescent boys carve out their own domain in the world (McRobbie, 1980).

The image of the street allows the videos to celebrate the expansive parameters of rebellious play and male adolescent license, which only in the extreme becomes socially classified as deviant. Even when the image of the street is physically absent from an individual video, it remains an implied presence. As a sign system, it perfectly summarizes boys' quests for adventure, rebellion, sexual encounter, peer relations, and male privilege. Male adolescent viewers formulate a symbolic equation between the representation of the street and their own privileged access to public space and patriarchal prerogatives. By playing on such an equation, music video empowers boy viewers by its specific form of adolescent address.

Male address videos draw fundamentally on the connection between male adolescent license and adult male rule by activating textual signs long common to patriarchal discourse. Reproducing coded images of the female body and conventionally positioning girls and women as objects of male voyeurism remain effective visual strategies for associating male adolescent desire with male dominance. Representations of females in music video become inflected in ways that facilitate their integration into the specific vision of male adolescent discourse. Girls, when they appear, are not represented as equal participants in the symbolic system, "the street," but function instead to delineate male adolescent fantasy.

MTV's textual enactment of gender ideology and social discourse is what feminist and moralist critics have observed when they raise objections to sexual stereotyping and misogynous imagery in music television. These critics, however, never directly relate charges of sexism to the channel's notion of target audience or to its ideological privileging of male adolescence, which pervades MTV's interpretation of its target audience. This is alarming, since MTV spokespersons constantly defend its policies as resulting from its need to cater to a youth audience. Bob Pittman, MTV's concept originator, consistently responded to allegations of sexism by naturalizing the highly ideological category of "adolescence" which MTV's format attempts to reproduce:

"It's not the Barry Manilow channel ... Some songs are unhappy. Some have a dark message. It's the essence of rock. It mirrors the issues of people moving from adolescence" (Levy, 1983, p. 76).

His response illustrates the disparity between MTV's rhetoric (that it was enacting an address to a broad demographic category of youth of both genders), and its textual practice (the representation of male adolescence). It also reveals how problematic the social complexities underlying certain demographic categories can become for producers of televisual content.

By identifying a "preferred" textual system of male address on MTV, I, too, raise the issue of "sexism in the text." But I wish to analyze that sexism in the broader terms of hegemonic preference discussed by Stuart Hall (1980, 1982). Applying Antonio Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony to signification practices, Hall (1982) argues that the power to signify, to control "the means by which collective social understandings are created" (p. 70) fundamentally aids the ruling power in maintaining consent over subordinates. In the case of male address on MTV, the hegemony of gender inequality and male adolescence becomes manifest in the way MTV excludes girls from male discourse, and in their coded and semiotically impoverished representation.

In Hall's (1982) terms, MTV's male adolescence discourse has become "the primary framework or terms of an argument," requiring parties interested in creating a female voice (select female musicians and audiences) "to perform with the established terms of the problematic in play (p. 81)." A number of female musicians have taken up the challenge of rearticulating the text, appropriating MTV's male youth address, and producing a new address to female adolescents. Their videos engage in "struggle over meaning" by offering representations that resonate with *female* cultural experiences of adolescence and gender in Britain and the United States.

Female address began to coalesce on MTV, in my estimation, around the year 1983, with the release of Lauper's video, GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN. The music videos of a number of female musicians cohered in this and following years to establish a new and distinct textual practice. Their videos represented female adolescence within the more general social condition of gender inequality.

To accomplish this, female address videos use two interrelated textual sign systems, which I call respectively *access signs* and *discovery signs*.^[6] Access signs visually appropriate the privileged experience of boys and men. The female video texts enter the male domain of activity and signification. Symbolically they execute take-overs of male space, erase sex-roles, and demand parity with male privilege. In this way, the video texts challenge assumptions about the boundaries which gender, as a social construct, draws around men and women.

Discovery signs coexist and interact with access signs. They refer to and celebrate distinctly female modes of cultural expression and experience. Discovery signs attempt to compensate in a mediated form for female cultural marginalization as they depict those activities which females tend to engage apart from males. In female address videos, access signs open out into discovery signs that rejoice in specifically female forms of leisure and cultural expression and female sources of social bonding to which adolescent boys have little access. By representing girl practices, the videos set a tone that celebrates female resourcefulness and cultural distinctiveness.

Music videos from four women musicians, appearing in the years 1983 and 1984,^[7] serve as examples of the textual strategies of female address. The videos of Cyndi Lauper, Madonna, Pat Benatar, and Tina Turner all have a similar visual treatment of gender experience and a nuanced, yet consistent, use of both access and discovery signs.

ACCESS SIGNS: APPROPRIATING THE MEANING OF THE STREET

The image of the street, exploited as a textual strategy in MTV's male adolescent discourse, summons up different and distinct connotations for female adolescents. Female socialization leads women and girls to avoid streets for fear of harassment and rape. They expect to become objects of the male gaze if they make themselves too visible by loitering or even walking slowly. Girls are discouraged from participating in much of the leisure activity, social bonding practices, and subcultural formations associated with the male street culture. McRobbie (1980) describes gendered standards of leisure within youth culture as resulting from the broader social system of gender inequality. Female address videos rework the ideological representations of male privilege by appropriating the image of the

street for to produce female-oriented access signs.

In *GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN*, the bouncing Lauper leads her band of girlfriends through New York city streets in a frenzied snake dance that turns women's experience of foreboding streets upside-down in a carnivalesque display. Their arms reaching out for more and more space, the women push through a group of male construction workers, who function as symbols of female harassment on the street. The lyrical refrain, "Girls Just Want To Have Fun," enacts a powerful cry for access to the privileged realm of male adolescent leisure and fun.

Madonna's *BORDERLINE* immerses the star and female extras in male street-corner culture. Madonna is shown street dancing, spraying graffiti on urban walls, and loitering on a street corner with female peers. She blows kisses and initiates flirtation with street boys, and leads her girlfriends into the male turf of the pool hall. In short, she appropriates activities and spaces typically associated with male adolescence.

Pat Benatar's video, *LOVE IS A BATTLEFIELD*, presents a more militant version of the street take-over. The video begins by referring to women's usual experience on the street. Benatar, playing a homeless teenager, is shown being bumped and harassed by male passersby, a scenario extended to the male space of the bar. At a turning point in the video, we hear the scream of a woman as she is physically reprimanded by her pimp. Her voice, laid unconventionally over the musical soundtrack, shrieks out, "Leave Me Alone!" Thus, the call to access begins. With lyrics sung by Benatar on the sound track, "We are strong, no one can tell us we're wrong," the visual track shows Benatar and the other women in the bar bursting forth with aggressive chest thrusts and kicks, forcing the pimp back against the bar. Benatar violently splashes a drink in his face, a moment formally prioritized by sound effects. Retreating to the street, Benatar and her female companions demonstrate their solidarity and celebrate their defeat of the male ego. Benatar turns and saunters down the street, at last its rightful owner.

Tina Turner enacts signs of access in the video, *WHATS LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?* by taking a long, slow walk down a New York city street. Unlike the other videos, Turner's does not amass a group of females for a final scene of appropriation of male space. It is as if this has already happened. Rather, the video picks up where the Benatar video ends. Turner from the beginning walks alone on the street, already at one with it. Proceeding down the avenue, she encounters a male onlooker's gaze. Far from averting her eyes, Turner matches his gaze with one of her own, and they circle momentarily in an equal exchange of looking. She comes across a group of men shooting craps on the sidewalk, a representation of male street-corner culture. Pushing them aside, she recalls a similar action by Lauper in *GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN*. Magically, Turner has acquired the status and power to transcend the female experience of streets.

Female address videos take advantage of another code of male adolescence that the image of the street allows to surface — that of delinquency. Brake (1985) has testified to discrepancies in the ways male and female youth become articulated as social problems.

"Males have usually been involved with illegal activities such as theft or

violence or vandalism, and females with sexual misbehavior..."(p. 23).

The perception that girls are somehow "less delinquent" than boys has generally resulted in the governments' and social agencies' providing more social programs to male youth (Nava, 1984). Prostitution is considered the predominant mode of female delinquency, a form of behavior less visible than many male delinquent activities and easily misidentified. Girls who engage in street loitering or walking, so called "normal" behavior for boys, can become associated with delinquency, even find themselves institutionalized.

Female address videos focus on the attention and resources that male youth, who are perceived as social problems, have historically received. The videos challenge the double standard that regards female adolescent delinquency primarily in terms of sexual transgression, and they appropriate the richness of signification that the image of the street holds out to boys and men.

GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN explores common social responses to the "problem girl." Lauper's character bounds home one morning after apparently staying out all night. When she gets home, she finds her mother (played by Lauper's own mother) hard at work preparing food in the kitchen. The lyric, "When you gonna live your life right?" speaks for the mother. Her distress over the daughter's flagrant disregard for appropriate feminine behavior is expressed visually as she breaks an egg over her heart.

BORDERLINE places Madonna squarely in the role of (male) delinquent by showing her defacing property, loitering in "bad neighborhoods," and entering the pool hall. As the video combines images of street corner loitering and flirtation, it confuses the prostitute icon. In the way that the video builds tension between the two representations, it implicitly raises questions about how the code of prostitution is usually socially elaborated and about how representations of females on the street might be re-visioned.

LOVE IS A BATTLEFIELD investigates the code of the prostitute by placing Benatar's character in the situation of a teenager, cast out onto the street by an angry father. Unlike Madonna, she remains unassociated with the activities of male youth street culture. When we see her as merely a young woman walking the street, she seems visually close to the coded prostitute image. But because the street reappears in the video as a site for female camaraderie and displays of female style, the narrative redirects audience expectations. The access sign seems to say, "If women could share equally in the male adolescence discourse, then the code could be rewritten."

In WHATS LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT? Tina Turner challenges the prostitute code head on. Strutting down the street, her miniskirt, show of leg, and spiked-heeled shoes could operate to code her as a spectacle of male desire. Instead, the image she projects struggles for a different signification. It is easier to imagine the spikes as an offensive weapon than as a sexual lure or allusion to her vulnerability. Turner's control over her own body and interactions with others in the video, particularly with men, encourages revaluating her clothes and high heels; they seem less indices of her objectification than signs of her own pleasure in herself.[\[8\]](#)

Overall, the system of representation that constitutes access signs — female take-

overs of streets, men pushed aside and out of the way, equal exchanges of looks, and co-participation in leisure practices among boys and girls — makes reference to the differences girls experience publicly as a result of gendered social inequalities. Textually, such access signs propose solutions. In isolation, access signs argue in the language of role reversal and utopianism for equal rights and recognition. In combination with discovery signs, however, the politics of music videos' female address are made more complex. The videos push beyond merely transposing sex roles and practices to accommodate and valorize the specific culture of female adolescence.

DISCOVERY SIGNS: CREATING MEANING FROM GIRL CULTURE

Girl culture is often described in terms of a negative relation to male street culture and as having a functional relation to female gender oppression. It is rarely treated as a distinct cultural form in its own right. Frith (1981), for example, in the following passage, acknowledges girl culture modes of dancing and dressing up, but only as these activities reveal girls' socially objectified position:

"...all this female activity, whatever its fun and style and art as a collective occupation, is done, in the end, individually, for the boy's sake. It is the male gaze that gives girls' beauty work its meaning" (p. 229).

However, "fun and style and art as collective occupation" speak to girl culture's expressiveness and the world of leisure and social bonding it creates for girls. When social critics reduce these activities to girls' overdetermined desire to please boys, they reproduce male bias in cultural criticism.

McRobbie (1984) describes dance as an activity of control, pleasure and sensuality for girls. Dance, she suggests, offers girls "a positive and vibrant sexual expressiveness and a point of connection with other pleasures of femininity such as dressing up or putting on make-up" (p.145). The girl practice of learning and teaching specific dance steps indicates girls' wider participation in orchestrating body movements. Girls often spend hours with girlfriends practicing cheerleading routines, synchronized swimming moves, jump rope patterns. Choreographed movement provides a critical bond between girls and a means for negotiating common social restrictions on how they present their bodies and what the female body restrictively signifies. Discovery signs in women's music videos contribute to female address by referring back to and revaluing such female modes of cultural expression.

In *GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN*, Lauper and her girlfriends chat on the phone in shots of luxuriously long duration. The video summons up the pleasure that many girls find in choreographed movement with a shot of Lauper and friends swaying rhythmically to music, wrapped in intimate arm embraces. Dance is the mode through which Lauper and her female followers accomplish their symbolic take-back of the street. And at the video's end, the men encountered on the street, their threatening status alleviated, come to the Lauper character's home to experience female fun: dancing with wild abandon to records in one's bedroom.

In *LOVE IS A BATTLEFIELD*, dance represents a vehicle for the women's militancy. The women's choreographed chest thrusts and kicks combine a wild

sexual energy with self-defense moves to mock and threaten the pimp figure. And in WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT? Tina Turner adds to the sense of control she has over her body through distinctive steps and a calculated mix of gestures. The video also includes a shot of girls doing the "double dutch," a jump rope pattern, to complement a shot of men shooting craps.

McRobbie (1984) has also commented on the irony in subculture critics' preoccupation with style as male expression, given girls' historical investment in style and fashion. Female address videos reclaim style for girls and richly articulate style as a symbolic vehicle for female expression. Madonna's video, BORDERLINE, moves into discovery signs as it presents a common female fantasy of becoming a fashion model. In the video, a fashion photographer "discovers" the character played by Madonna during the first street dance scene. She participates in the excitement and pleasure of wearing glamorous clothes and make-up until the male photographer begins to assert his authority over her "look." Desiring to manage her own image, she returns to participate with boys in street culture.

Later Madonna videos rely on discovery signs to a greater extent, dwelling on the recognition that fashion and made-up faces achieves for women. MATERIAL GIRL, a peak performance by Madonna draped in jewels and male attendants, rewrites the tragic Marilyn Monroe image she references into a decidedly female image of recognition and power.[\[9\]](#)

Appearance, style and fashion have long been arenas of female cultural production and knowledge in the United States. From a child's birth, parents impose a gendered appearance, largely in the form of clothes, as they construct and enforce gender identity. Purchasing and dressing up in feminine clothes accompanies every major event in a girl's life from confirmation to prom night, until the arrival of the most fussed over ritual, the wedding with its expensive and rigidly defined attire. Dress codes and social restrictions on hairstyle and make-up often first exposes girls to gender contradictions. They learn that wearing particular clothes is a highly charged activity which pits their own desires against a host of social-approval ideologies.

The desire to dress like a boy is an early form of resistance to physical and mental restraints that gender definitions impose on girls. As girls age and experience physical body changes, they discover additional relations between modes of displaying the body and social responses. They learn not only to please and to placate by manipulating their appearance, but also to shock and to subvert. In *Interview* (1985) magazine, Madonna reveals that as a young girl, she adopted strategies of subversive self-presentation. She describes how she and a best girlfriend developed a sexual persona in order to subvert their parents' authority, an image which interestingly enough was inspired by their identification with a female musician:

"M: ...it was a private joke between my girlfriend and me, that we were floozies, because she used to get it from her mother all the time, too...

[Interviewer]: So somewhere you did like the floozy look.

M: Only because we knew that our parents didn't like it. We thought it was fun. We got dressed to the nines. We got bras and stuffed them so

our breasts were over-large and wore really tight sweaters — we were sweater girl floozies. We wore tons of lipstick and really badly applied makeup and huge beauty marks and did our hair up like Tammy Wynette." (Stanton, 1985, p. 60).

Madonna's distinctive star style refers back to the resistive stance she practiced as a girl. Her visual image engages with and hyperbolizes the discourse of femininity. Barbara Hudson (1984) asserts that this is a familiar tactic devised by girls to undermine the discourse of femininity, in particular, those social expectations that attempt to restrict girls' behavior and choices at the time of adolescence.

In her early videos, Madonna combines the contradictory accoutrements of a feminine presentation with the affected attitude of a cinematic vamp. Bleached blonde hair proudly displays its dark roots. Glamour eye make-up and lipstick create a look that is linked to Marilyn Monroe's. But Madonna's cocky demeanor exudes a self-assuredness and independence to counter Monroe's outdated, naive image. Skintight, lacy undergarments and crucifixes add up to a blasphemous, "bad girl" affectation, particularly apt for a woman who, we are told in the promotional press, hated the uniforms at her own Catholic school.

Lauper's image in her early videos is more an ode to the adolescence discourse, enacting an alignment girls make in yet another attempt to counter a restrictive femininity discourse. She presents a rebellious, anti-feminine, "she's so unusual" image. Her display of odd color combinations in dress and hair, wearing of gaudy fake jewelry, and application of striped and sequined eye make-up mock socially appropriate modes of female attire and behavior. It is this sense of bucking the norm that *Ms.* magazine applauded by awarding Lauper a "Woman of the Year" citation in 1985, in explanatory notes characterizing her rebellious style as a feminist stance.

Girls' stake in their appearance involves them intensely in shopping and consumer culture. Critics have been reluctant to consider consumption practice as a sign of cultural production. Many analysts have demonstrated a distinct aversion to most forms of commercial culture, coding the marketplace as the antithesis of authentic cultural expression, as essentially a mechanism of capitalist economic reproduction.

Such assumptions proved obstacles when looking at girl cultural forms. They reduce girls' participation in consumption to a kind of false consciousness, useful only in preparing girls for reproductive social roles. Carter (1984) develops McRobbie's (1976, 1980) critique of male bias in the theoretical work on youth subculture, [\[10\]](#) citing the way culture critics have aligned commercialism and female gender and depreciate both:

"Like the phenomena which they examine, the analyses themselves are founded on a number of unspoken oppositions: conformity and resistance, harmony and rapture, passivity and activity, consumption and appropriation, femininity and masculinity" (p.186).

If we look closely at the overlap between consumption practice and female gender, we could find far more complicated patterns of use and more activity between the seemingly opposed characteristics that Carter (1984) has identified in the cultural

critics' pejorative assumptions. In the United States, consumer culture helps define and support female adolescent leisure practice, and it forms a basis for girls' experience in common. The shopping mall functions as a popular female substitute for the streets of their male counterparts. Like the street, the mall offers an active, semi-anonymous site for adolescent loitering and friends' gatherings, but within a more restricted and supervised setting. Girls at the mall can retreat into stores, which offer the added attraction of shopping, an activity girls like to do together. For some girls, knowing what looks are in vogue, tracing cultural influences on designs and designers, and participating in the popularity of certain fashions becomes a form of private communication much like male sports talk. Fashion talk circulates as a kind of female knowledge at which boys and men are typically less competent.

Madonna and Cyndi Lauper have expertly created styles to address adolescent girls' involvement in fashion and consumer girl culture. Madonna manipulates the look of glamour and the codes of high fashion into appropriations and re-combinations. Her style of dress taps into viewer fascination with fashion models and the ability of celebrities to direct trends. Lauper wears thrift store and boutique renditions which re-circulate fashions from the past. They call attention to the consumption's circularity, point out ways to construct personal style on a budget, and suggest how to exercise control over the terms of prevailing fashion trends. The styles of the two stars articulate the tensions between conforming to and resisting codes of gendered appearance, between following marketplace dictates and innovating fashion trends.

Discovery signs, then, address girls by referring to modes of female adolescent fun and leisure, to the ways girls engage in peer associations, and to girls' methods for creatively negotiating the specific difficulties that result from being female at the time of adolescence. In this way, female address videos suggest to female spectators that access to the privileged realm of male cultural experience is partially a matter of discovering their own cultural agency.

FEMALE FAN RESPONSE: STYLE IMITATION

Discussion of female address in music video is incomplete without some attention to how the videos are acknowledged and made meaningful as female address by an actual social audience of girls.[\[11\]](#) I have already suggested ways in which manipulating appearance affects many of girls' cultural exchanges and affective practices. Discovery signs in women's music video often incorporate style as a way of creating female address. Style is also a mode through which girls formulate their response to the videos and their associated female stars.

Dressing alike is a familiar practice in girls' lives before heterosexual desire has become rigidly channeled. It is also the time when girl friendships are most valued. Griffin (1985) describes how girls express "best friend" relationships by wearing "exactly the same clothes, shoes, hairstyles, even jewelry" (p. 61).

Female fans of female address videos extend the status of "best friend" to their favorite musician by imitating her dress and mimicking her mannerisms. When girls imitate their favorite stars' style, this activity relates to the broader practice of "fandom." Fans often make themselves into authorities of texts, not by research but through intensely engaging with those texts over time. When a fan copies a favored

star's style, that demonstrates the fan's knowledge of intricate textual references. Girls in particular imitate style as a means of expressing textual competency; they learned some of their first lessons in producing and interpreting texts by studying fashion magazines. In this way when female fans imitate style, they both display a fan's characteristic display of textual knowledge and a girl's involvement in style as a form of female knowledge.

The shopping mall has become a site around which female fan participation in female address videos has coalesced. "Madonna is everywhere," writes one biographer. "There is even a mall in California that people have nicknamed 'the Madonna mall' because so many girls who shop there try to look just like her" (Matthews, 1985, p. 8).

In response to the popularity of the "Madonna Style," Macy's Department Store created a department called "Madonnaland" devoted to selling the cropped sweaters (\$30), cropped pants (\$21), and a variety of jewelry accessories such as crucifix earrings and outsize "pearl" necklaces (\$4-\$59) resembling those worn by Madonna.^[12] The department mobilized Madonna fans in the summer of 1985 when Macy's sponsored a Madonna look-alike contest to coincide with the star's New York concert date. To provoke attendance, Macy's ran this full page ad in the *Village Voice* with text designed to capitalize on fan familiarity with Madonna's video, "Material Girl," and the movie, *DESPERATELY SEEKING SUSAN* in which she co-starred and performed the song, "Into the Groove":

JRS!
DESPERATELY SEEKING MADONNA LOOK-ALIKES
Join our Madonna Day contest, Thurs, June 6
in Madonnaland on 4, Macy's Herald Square.
If you're a brassy material girl, get into the
groove and prove it... ("JRS!" 1985, p. 24)

The overwhelming response was featured on both MTV and the ABC Evening News where Madonna "wanna-bes" reveled in their new-found fame. On camera, they gushed that they "wanted to be famous" and "to be looked at" like their idol, Madonna. For one magical moment, in front of Peter Jennings and ABC viewers, it came to pass.

The desire for fame and attention that girl fans express relates back to their experience of gender inequality, back to the fact that they are excluded from male forms of cultural expression and privilege. These are the conditions that access signs attempt to speak about and resolve symbolically in female address videos. Girls' desire for recognition as expressive cultural subjects in their own right is what discovery signs articulate and try to fulfill. Female fans of female address videos interact with the text in ways that are consistent with, and even celebrate, the system of address represented in the text. They demand access to male privileges of fun, money, and authority, which they find embodied in celebrities, but they also refuse to give up the expressive forms that female culture has provided. The popularity of female address video among girls has helped define and create a distinctive, gendered textual practice on MTV.

Within an industrial and textual system which prefers male musicians and male adolescents, female audiences have participated in the struggles of female

musicians for authorship by providing audience consent and accepting the musicians as authors of a subjective textual voice. Fandom has provided an effective vehicle for girl audiences to organize in support of female musician authors and female address textual strategies. The fans' intense displays of identification with the women musicians' texts has created structures for expressing "popularity," which has extended the usual measure of women musicians' textual success, ratings, and ultimately product sales. Through their fan practices, girl fans have produced a surplus of popularity, a kind of popularity excess, which functions to win consent for female musician authorship and the alternative system of meaning represented in female address videos.

Girl audience's participation, then, involved more than their interpreting new meanings against a preferred address. Such are the terms in which much cultural theory locates resistive textual practice. Rather, this resistive activity has been the result of a complex and dynamic interaction of decoding and encoding practices. Authors and audiences aligned at the site of the text and cooperated to make changes that were in their own respective social interests. The struggle over meaning took a material form as women musicians created new texts with a revised form of address. Female address has satisfied female musicians who are searching for a more complex and subjective mode of self-representation. It appeals to female audiences who want a system of textual discourse comparable to the prominent male adolescent address. And it even serves MTV, whose primary interest is to deliver a youth audience to advertisers.

As a result, the preferred encoding of male address in music video has been unable to sustain fully its ideological dominance. The creation of an alternative address has strained the hegemony of male adolescent discourse inscribed in rock music and music video. The hegemonically controlled entry of women into modes of cultural production, both as authors and as audiences, has been undermined by their engagement in the struggle over authorship and meaning on MTV.

One of the driving forces behind this essay has been my desire to examine and refute the charge that MTV'S visual discourse constitutes an overwhelmingly and uniformly sexist address. I wish to suggest how such claims risk reducing complex textual and social processes to simplistic and one-dimensional characterizations of how meaning is generated and exchanged. When critics look only at textual examples of social reproduction, they fail to consider the conditional and historical character of textual meaning and the role of human agency in signification practices. In the case of MTV, they overlook how issues of sexism and gender inequality are contested within individual videos, across the channel's schedule of videos, and at the points where the videos converge with the social practices of producers and audiences.

To Notes on [page 2](#)

MTV and girls

page 2

from *Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, pp. 2-15

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1990, 2006

NOTES

1. In the popular arena, the Parents' Music Resource Center, headed by wives of prominent government officials, organized to focus attention on so-called "pornographic" rock music lyrics and album covers, persuading Congress to hold hearings to establish a system for rating records similar to the one used for rating movies. Male musicians and bands came under the most fire, although Cyndi Lauper made the list for "She Bop," her song about female autoeroticism ("The Women Behind the Movement," 1985). The Parents' Choice Foundation distributed a review of sexism on MTV in their newsletter, lumping Benatar's video, LOVE IS A BATTLEFIELD, with its "worst cases" videos, describing it in the following terms: "...one performer fights with her ornery parents then leaves home to become a hooker" (Wilson, 1984, p. 3). Other examples of popular criticism that describe music video as sexist include Levy (1983) and Barol (1985).

In academic criticism, the arguments are more sophisticated, but frequently lead to the same charge. Brown and Campbell (1984) used content analysis to argue for a lack of positive female images on MTV, without ever addressing the issue of female musicianship. Kaplan (1985, 1986) has explored female representation in music video in several papers. Although she points out "alternative" representations in some of the same videos I analyze, ultimately she argues for the overdetermination of male address. Holdstein (1985) provides a textual reading of Donna Summer's "She Works Hard for the Money," arguing against a feminist interpretation.

2. Rieger (1985) dates the institutional exclusion of women from musical composition and performance back to the beginning of cultural institutions themselves. Churches in the middle ages made it an official practice to bar females from participation in liturgical rites, effectively creating a gender boundary to high music' culture. Early educational institutions reserved musical training and opportunities primarily for their male students.

Women's music-making was forced into popular culture forms, and with respect to the formation of the bourgeoisie in the 18th century, into domestic space. Female piano playing and singing were designed as appropriate forms of musical expression for women and incorporated into the bourgeois woman's role in the family.

"It was important to a man's prestige that his wife could entertain his

guests with music, and of course a musical education for his daughter served as a good investment for an advantageous marriage" (p. 141).

Music by women was conceived as a service provided for fathers, husbands, and children, not as a source of pleasure for themselves, or as a career direction, a means for making money. Prior to the influx of women, men were accustomed to performing music in the home. But as music in a domestic setting became associated with bourgeois female roles, men responded by establishing professional standards and devaluing the amateur status. Women inherit this legacy of too little institutional support and dominant ideological attitudes pertaining to the suitability of musical expression for women. And these conditions form the bases of male-dominated musical forms today, including rock and roll.

3. The following sources enabled me to trace the decline of the record industry and to feel justified in crediting the start of music video cable distribution with its subsequent turnaround: Henke (1982), Hickling (1981) Kirkeby (1980), Loder & Pond (1982), Pond (1982), Sutherland (1980), and Wallace (1980).

4. Information about sales and rankings of female musicians were constructed from the following sources: Brandt (1982), Grein (1985), Loder (1984), Miller, et. al. (1985), Swartley (1982), Turner & Loder(1986).

5. I use the term "patriarchy" loosely, as have many feminist critics, to describe an institutional system of male privilege and female subordination under capitalism, not as a strict anthropological description.

6. I am indebted to Nava's (1984) discussion of youth service provision to girls in Britain for providing the initial impetus behind my identification of these two categories of sign types.

7. A fuller discussion of the videos described below and other female address videos from 1985 and 1986 is included in Lewis, 1987 (Dissertation).

8. Kleinhans (1986) adds to my analysis of WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT? the suggestion that the video continues a tradition of black woman's blues. "As black feminist critics Michelle Russell and Michele Wallace discuss, black women's blues insist on the woman's integrity — she won't love someone who doesn't love her" (p. 30).

9. A recommended analysis of this video is Brown & Fiske (1987).

10. Carter (1984) cites the work of Hoggart (1957), Cohen (1972), Hall and Jefferson (1976), Hebdige (1979), and Willis (1977) as examples.

11. Kuhn (1984) suggests the use of the term "social audience" to refer to the group of people (social subjects) who actually view the media texts under discussion. I adopt the term to make a distinction between actual viewership groups and target audience, the term used by media industries to signify a perceived or projected audience.

12. Pricing information for Madonna ready-to-wear clothing and accessories obtained from an article in *Seventeen* ("Funky Frills," 1985).

REFERENCES

- Ardener, S. (1975). "Sexual Insult and Female Militancy." In S. Ardener (Ed.), *Perceiving Women* (pp. 29-83). New York: John Wiley Publishers.
- Barol, B. (1985, March 4). "Women in a Video Cage." *Newsweek*, p. 54.
- Benatar, P. (1987, February 25). Phone interview with author.
- Bessman, 1. (1985, March 9). "How Clips Helped Break Cyndi." *Billboard*, p. 38.
- Brake, M. (1985). *Comparative Youth Culture*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Brandt, P. (1982, September). "At Last...Enough Women Rockers To Pick and Choose." *Ms.*, pp. 110-116.
- Brown, J. D. & Campbell, K. C. (1984, January). "The Same Beat But A Different Drummer: Race and Gender in Music Videos." Paper presented at the University Film and Video Association Conference, Harrisonburg, Va.
- Brown, M. E., & Fiske, J. (1987). "Romancing the Rock – Romance and Representation in Popular Music Videos." *One Two Three Four – A Rock'n Roll Quarterly*, No. 5, 61-73.
- Carter, E. (1984). "Alice in the Consumer Wonderland." In A. McRobbie & M. Nava (Eds.), *Gender and Generation* (pp. 185-214). London: MacMillan.
- Caughie, J. (1981). *Theories of Authorship*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Cohen, P. (1972). "Subcultural Conflict and Working Class Community." *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, 2(Spring), pp. n.a.
- Fiske, J. (1986). "Television: Polysemy and Popularity." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 3(4), pp. 391-408.
- Feuer, J., Kerr, P., & Vahiinagi, T. (1984). *MTM: 'Quality TV'*. London: BR.
- Frith, S. (1981). *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n Roll*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Frith, S., & McRobbie, A. (1978/1979). "Rock and Sexuality." *Screen Education*, 29, 3-19.
- "Funky Frills: Take Center Stage in Cyndi Lauper and Madonna-inspired Extras." (1985, July). *Seventeen*, p. 34.
- Gardiner, J. (1979). "Women's Domestic Labor." In Z. Eisenstein (Ed.), *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (pp. 173-189). New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Q. Eloare & G. Nowell-Smith (Eds. & Trans.). London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Grein, Paul (1985, August 10). "Hot Madonna." *Billboard*, pp. 1, 71.

- Griffin, C. (1985). "Leisure: Deffing Out and Having a Laugh." In *Typical Girls? Young Women From School to the Job Market* (pp. 58-71). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Grossberg, L. (1984). "I'd Rather Feel Bad Than Feel Anything at All: Rock and Roll, Pleasure and Power." *Enclitic*, 8(1-2), 94-111.
- Hall, S. (1980). "Encoding/Decoding." In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, Media, Language* (pp. 128-138). London: Hutchinson.
- Hall, S. (1982). "The Rediscovery of 'Ideology': Return of the Repressed in Media Studies." In M. Gurevitch, T. Bennett, J. Curran, & J. Woollacott (Eds.), *Culture, Society and the Media* (pp. 56-90). London: Methuen.
- Hall, S., & Jefferson, T. (Eds.), (1976). *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*. London: Hutchinson.
- Hebdige, D. (1983). "Posing...Threats, Striking..Poses: Youth, Surveillance, and Display." *SubStance*, 37/38, 68-88.
- Hebdige, D. (1982). *Subcultures: The Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen.
- Henke, J. (1982, March 4). "1981: Another Bad Year for the Record Industry." *Rolling Stone*, p. 51.
- Henley, N. (1977). *Body Politics*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice Hall.
- Hickling, M. (1981, October 15). "Record Sales Hold Steady With Last Year's." *Rolling Stone*, p. 52.
- Hoggart, R. (1957). *Uses of Literacy: Changing Patterns in English Mass Culture*. Fairlawn, New Jersey: Essential Books.
- Holdstein, D. H. (1985). "Music Video Messages and Structures." *Jump Cut*, 29(1), 13-14.
- Hopkins, L. (1972). "The Fans." In H.R. Huebel (Ed.), *Things In the Driver's Seat: Readings in Popular Culture* (pp. 161-172) Chicago: Rand McNally & Co.
- Homaday, A. (1985, January). "Cyndi Lauper." *Ms.*, p. 47.
- Hudson, B. (1984). "Femininity and Adolescence." In A. McRobbie and M. Nava (Eds.), *Gender and Generation* (pp. 31-53). London: Macmillan Publishers.
- "JRS!" Macy's Advertisement. (1985, June 11) *Village Voice*.
- Kaplan, E. A. (1986, Winter). "History, the Historical Spectator and Gender Address in Music Television." *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, pp. 3-14.
- Kaplan, E. A. (1985). "A Post-Modern Play of the Signifier? Advertising, Pastiche and Schizophrenia in Music Television." In P. Drummond & R. Paterson (Eds.), *Television in Transition* (pp. 146-163). London: British Film Institute.

- Kirkeby, M. (1980, October 2). "The Pleasures of Home Taping." *Rolling Stone*, pp. 62-64.
- Kleinhans, C. (1985). "Fashioning the Fetish: The Social Semiotics of High Heel Shoe Images." Unpublished Lecture. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University.
- Kuhn, A. (1984). "Women's Genres." *Screen*, 25(1), 18-28.
- Kuhn, A. (1982). *Women's Pictures*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Laing, D. (1985). *Power and Meaning in Punk Rock*. Milton Keynes, England: Open University Press.
- Leach, W. R. (1984). "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890-1925." *Journal of American History*, 71(2),
- Levy, S. (1983, December 8). "Ad Nauseam: How MTV Sells Out Rock and Roll." *Rolling Stone*, pp. 30-37, 74-79.
- Lewis, L.A. (1987, Winter). "Female Address in Music Video." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 11(1), 73-84.
- Lewis, L.A. (1987). *Female Address in Music Video: The Emergence of a Contradictory Cultural Discourse*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin.
- Lewis, L.A. (1987). "Form and Female Authorship in Music Video." *Communication*, 9, 355-377.
- Lewis, L.A. (1987, Spring). "Consumer Girl Culture: How Music Video Appeals to Women." *One Two Three Four — A Rock 'n' Roll Quarterly*, 5, 5-15.
- Loder, K., & Pond, S. (1982 September 30). "Record Industry Nervous as Sales Drop Fifty Percent." *Rolling Stone*, pp. 69, 78-79.
- Marc, D. (1984). *Demographic Vistas*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Marchetti, G. (1982). "Documenting Punk: A Subcultural Investigation." *Film Reader*, 5, pp. 269-284.
- Matthews, G. (1985). *Madonna*. New York: Wanderer Books/Simon & Schuster.
- McRobbie, A. (1984). "Dance and Social Fantasy." In A. McRobbie & M. Nava (Eds.), *Gender and Generation* (pp. 130-161). London: Macmillan.
- McRobbie, A. (1983). "Jackie: An Ideology of Adolescent Femininity. In E. Wartella & D.C. Whitney (Eds.), *Mass Communication Review Yearbook* (Vol. 4, pp. 273-283). Beverly Hills: Sage.
- McRobbie, A. (1980). "Settling Accounts with Subcultures: A Feminist Critique." *Screen Education*, 34, 37-49.
- McRobbie, A., & Garber, J. (1976). "Girls and Subcultures." In S. Hall and T.

- Jefferson (Eds.), *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (pp. 209-22). London: Hutchinson.
- Meehan, E. R. (1986). "Conceptualizing Culture as Commodity: The Problem of Television." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 3(4), 448-457.
- Miller, J., McGuigan, C., Uehling, M. D., Huck, J., & McAlevey, P. (1985, March 4). "Rock's New Women." *Newsweek*, pp. 48-57.
- Nava, M. (1984). "Youth Service Provision, Social Order and the Question of Girls." In A. McRobbie & M. Nava (Eds.), *Gender and Generation* (pp. 1-30). London: MacMillan.
- Newcomb, H. M. (1984). "On the Dialogic of Mass Communication." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 1, pp. 34-50.
- Newcomb, H. M., & Hirsch, P. M. (1983). "Television as a Cultural Forum." *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 8(2), pp. 45-55.
- Pond, S. (1982 September 2). "Record Rental Stores Booming in U.S." *Rolling Stone*, pp. 37, 42-43.
- Rich, A. (1983). "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." In A. Snitow, C. Stansell & S. Thompson (Eds.), *Powers of Desire* (pp. 177-205). New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Rieger, E. (1985). "Dolce semplice? On the Changing Role of Women in Music." In G. Ecker (Ed.), *Feminist Aesthetics* (pp. 135-149). London: The Women's Press Ltd.
- Reiter, R. R. (1975). "Men and Women in the South of France: Public and Private Domains." In R. R. Reiter (Ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (pp. 252-282). New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Ross, E., & Rapp, R. (1981). "Sex and Society: A Research Note from Social History and Anthropology." In A. Snitow, C. Stansell & S. Thompson (Eds.), *Powers of Desire* (pp. 51-72). New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Rubin, G. (1975). "The Traffic In Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." In R. R. Reiter (Ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (pp. 157-210). New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Shore, M. (1984). *The Rolling Stone Book of Rock Video*. New York: Rolling Stone Press.
- Stanton, H. D. (1985, December). "Madonna." *Interview*, pp. 58-68.
- "State of the Industry: Part I: The Cable Numbers According to Broadcasting." (1981, November 30). *Broadcasting*, pp. 36-52.
- Sutherland, S. (1980, May). "Record Business: The End of An Era." *Hi Fidelity*, p. 96.

Swartley, A. (1982, June). "Girls! Live! On Stage!" *Mother Jones*, pp. 25-31.

The Meldrum Tapes (1986). Interview with Cyndi Lauper and David Wolff, MTV Cablecast.

Turner, T., & Loder, K. (1986). *I, Tina*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.

Vener, A. M., & Hoffer, C. (1965). "Adolescent Orientations to Clothing." In M. B. Roach and J. B. Eicher (Eds.), *Dress, Adornment & the Social Order* (pp 768 1). New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Volosinov, V.N. (1973). *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. New York: Seminar Press.

Wallace, R. (1980, May 29). "Crisis? What Crisis?" *Rolling Stone*, pp. 17,28,30-31.

Weinbaum, B., & Bridges, A. (1979). "The Other Side of the Paycheck: Monopoly Capital and the Structure of Consumption." In Z.R. Eisenstein (Ed.), *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (pp. 190-205). New York: Monthly Review Press.

Williams, R. (1981). "Analysis of Culture." In T. Bennett, G. Martin, C. Mercer, & J. Woollacott (Eds.), *Culture, Ideology and Social Process* (pp. 43-52). London: Open University Press.

Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Willis, P. (1977). *Learning To Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*. London: Saxon House.

Wilson, S. (1984). "So There It All Is: Rock TV 1984." *Parents' Choice*, pp. 3. 14.

Wolfe, A. (1983). "Rock on Cable: On MTV: Music Television, the First Video Music Channel." *Popular Music and Society*, 9 (1), 41-60.

Wolmuth, R. (1983, October 17). "Rock'n'Roll'n'Video: MTV's Music Revolution." *People Magazine*, pp. 96,99-104.

"The Women Behind the Movement." (1985, July 15). *Broadcasting*, p. 42.

Sexual representation: introduction

by the editors

from *Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, p. 16

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1990, 2006

In this issue we are presenting four articles on sexual representation in cinema. JUMP CUT has had a longstanding interest in gender representation and, more specifically, in the media's use of sexuality. JUMP CUT editor Linda Williams recently published one of the first texts analyzing pornography as a genre — *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley, Univ. of CA Press, 1989). This pioneering work opens up a crucial area for serious media criticism and hopefully classroom teaching. It establishes the context for analyzing sexual media in a feminist, non-puritanical way.

In this Special Section, Gertrud Koch looks back at pornographic cinema's very early use in brothels and forward to pornography's current function of replacing brothels altogether. She offers a particularly insightful discussion of the specific kind of voyeurism which pornographic cinema elicits, and she ties that voyeurism to the more general "economy" of the senses which advanced industrial economies need. As Harry Braverman demonstrated in *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism*, Taylorism in industry now relies on a world of paperwork, computers, and automation. The visual acuity and alertness demanded from the workforce becomes reinforced by an entertainment industry marketing visual sexual desire.

Koch also applies insights from Michel Foucault to discuss what can be seen as a more positive aspect of pornography, the relation between lust or sexual exploration to a will to knowledge. Foucault saw this relation as primarily a repressive one, with lust and power propelling each other. He finds that the ever-expanding discourse on sexuality reinforces oppressive, diffuse structures of social control. Koch accepts much of Foucault's analysis, but she looks beyond it to see in pornography both an extension of infantile sexual learning and a profusion of concrete details, which women may appropriate concretely or symbolically for themselves to construct alternative modes of subjectivity and pleasure.

In this vein, earlier articles in JUMP CUT (No. 30, Mar 1985) by Thomas Waugh and Richard Dyer have also discussed pornography's more positive function in serving the will to knowledge. Both men analyze pornography's crucial role in giving gay adolescent males the knowledge of what homosexuality is. In this issue of JUMP CUT, Chris Straayer offers an additional analysis of how lesbian viewers can and do appropriate the sexual representations offered them by the dominant entertainment industry, which always structures its products upon the ideology of

what Adrienne Rich aptly defines as "compulsory heterosexuality." Straayer calls on feminist cultural critics to re-examine their analysis of subject positions for film viewers as either masculine or feminine, in which the feminine viewing position is equated with masochism, transvestism, or masquerade. The positing of alternative subject positions, either in terms of sexual preference or racial and ethnic identity, is crucial if feminist film criticism is to take into account the result of individual activity and assertion in receiving film and television texts.

Finally, two analyses of specific films, *EL BRIGADISTA* analyzed by John Ramirez, and *GANJA AND HESS* analyzed by Manthia Diawara and Phyllis Klotman, provide insight into how a film text can use sexual representation in a narrowly hegemonic way to uphold a progressive cause (*EL BRIGADISTA*) or transform what might be thought of as an exploitation genre, the vampire film, to explore complex forms of racial and sexual representation which undermine hegemonic ideology and the power structures it supports (*GANJA AND HESS*).

One of the most drastic changes that has occurred in media production and distribution in the last decade has been the creation of a domestic space for pornography. This has come about through VCRs, the distribution of pornographic video in an ever-expanding network of video rental stores, and in the cablecasting of soft-core pornography. To the audience for hard-core can be added the equally voyeuristic viewership for more "serious," often confessional television programs dealing verbally with the same subject matter but derived of visual explicitness — e.g., *DR. RUTH*, *DONAHUE* and *OPRAH*. The change in availability of explicitly sexual media creates a different climate and set of expectations about sexual representation. Artists and media critics have to deal with these issues in an era of political and sexual repression, yet the very fact of sexual conservatism makes our dealing openly with this subject matter even more necessary. *JUMP CUT* remains committed to exploring these issues in a feminist, gay, anti-racist, and sex-positive way.

On pornographic cinema: the body's shadow realm

by Gertrude Koch

translated by Jan-Christopher Horak

from *Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, pp. 17-29

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1990, 2006

This essay is a translation of Gertrud Koch's contribution to an anthology of criticism about pornographic cinema, LUST UND ELENDE: DAS EROTISCHE KINO, eds. Karola Gramann, Gertrud Koch, Heide Schlipman, Mona Winter, Bernhard Pleschinger, and Karsten Witte, "Report Film" Series (Munich: Bücher, CJ Verlag, 1981).

History of pornographic film: cinema in brothels, brothels in cinema, cinema instead of brothels

Film history also chronicles cinema's limitations, supervision, regimentation, judicial constraint, and channeling of norms. Looking over chronologies in film history, we clearly see the censor's "danger signals" which would classify, catalogue and direct cinematographic production into acceptable and forbidden zones:

"According to a police directive, censorship cards will be instituted and censorship jurisdiction will be transferred to the police president for Berlin's respective police precincts (May 20, 1908)." (Fraenkel, p.380)

"The Seventh Criminal Court screened a film which has caused public offense at Berlin Police Headquarters. All members of the tribunal are present; it's the first judicial examination of a film in Germany (Dec. 12, 1909). "

"In New York the Peoples Institute of New York and Dr. Charles Sprague establish the 'National Board of Censorship' as a film examination board (1909)." (Fraenkel, p. 382)

"In Sweden film censorship is instituted in accordance with the expressed wishes of the film industry (1911). "

"According to a German city ordinance, every film must be presented to the responsible precinct 24 hours before public screening (1911). "

(Fraenkel, p. 385)

"Through the founding of the Hays Organization's code, 'Motion Picture and Distribution of America,' the American film industry is subjugated to a form of voluntary self-control (1922)." (Fraenkel, p. 408)

Although these historians do not describe the exact regulation in effect at the time — i.e., what was considered offensive — we know from another source that the censorship authorities collected pornographic films:

"The supervising authorities, the police, know the most about that genre of films, which is destined to lead a secret, humble existence. We define pornographic films as the cinematographic depiction of all proceedings pertaining to sex in an obscene form; they include pretty much everything human fantasy can possibly invent in the area of sexuality. They pass directly from the producer to the consumer without the censor having seen them, and with good reason. Still, the archives of the police authorities are filled with films, such as change and vigilance have sent their way." (Moreck, p.173)

Despite the short time lag between the invention of cinema and the institutionalization of censorship, pornographic films had enough time to secure a broad base. In the absence of censorship pornography bloomed as early as 1904. Pornographic films developed technically from still photography to stereoscopes and mutascopes, so that by 1904 these films consisted of four acts and ran twenty minutes. Early blue movies thus kept abreast with most of the medium's technological developments.

What kind of aesthetic development occurred in this genre? Can we in fact even speak of a genre? And what defines its aesthetic? In order to answer this question, we must consider those few sources describing early pornographic films and their organizational forms:

"In most cases, these sodadic films were screened in private societies or especially in men's clubs founded for this purpose. Tickets in Germany cost between 10 and 30 marks. The distribution of tickets was handled by prostitutes, pimps, cafe waiters, barbers and other persons in contact with the clientele, and they earned a tidy profit through scalping. Since vendors usually knew their clientele and its inclinations, they seldom came into conflict with the police." (Moreck, p. 175)

Pornographic films were above all bought and screened by brothels, which hoped to entice their customers with filmic offerings while earning money from services rendered through selling tickets for the screening. At first, it was expensive to buy pornographic pleasure. It was reserved for well-to-do customers, who frequented such establishments in every European metropolis from Paris to Moscow. Abroad, both Buenos Aires and Cairo offered international tourists a chance to visit pornographic cinemas. In "Die Schaubuhne," Kurt Tucholsky describes such a film experience in Berlin:

"No one spoke loudly, since all were a bit anxious; they only murmured. The screen turned white, a broken, silver-white lit up, trembling. It began. But everyone laughed, myself included. We had expected

something unheard of and extravagant. We saw a meow-kitty and woof-doggie romping on the screen. Maybe the importer had added the scene to fake out the police. Who knows? Monotonously rattling, the film ran without music; it was gloomy and not very pleasant..."

"Things remained *gemütlich* [easy, pleasant] in the cinema. We didn't imagine that even Tristan and Isolde would seem ridiculous, that Romeo and Juliet, viewed from another planet objectively and soberly, i.e., independently, would seem a comic and stiff-laced affair."

"No nothing of the sort among the viewers. The only reason they didn't play cards was because it was too dark; otherwise, a rather stout and massive pleasure pervaded. They always had to say mendacious things here. Here people knew..."

"When it was over, it was such a gloomy ending. Everyone thought more was coming. It became evident that sexuality is a tricky matter. The men hung around and were embarrassed emphasizing the lack of higher values in general...And then we shuffled into a neighborhood establishment where the music was loud and shrill, and everyone was strangely quiet and excited. I later heard that the proprietor ordered twenty call girls." (Moreck, pp. 179-80)

The Berlin event had an atmosphere of male-bonded, laborious harmony, embarrassingly hidden arousal, and awkward mirth. It was apparently no special case. Norbert Jacques gives us another description in Buenos Aires, enriching the steamy, Berliner beer feeling with sadomasochistic, exotic stereotypes, exuding lurking danger and destruction:

"One night I reached a point beyond the criminal quarter of Caracas, walking along the harbor where large flat Platte River steamers slept. An odd and at the same time eye-catching scaffolding stopped me ... While looking up at its fantastic height, I saw a boat under me with a light, tied to the harbor wall. The man in the boat yelled something at me. This man and I were well alone. He came up to me and pointed across the harbor, saying: 'Isla Maciel,' then in internationalese, 'Cinematografo. Niña, deutsch, frances, englishmen, amor, dirty cinematographico' ... A large arc lamp radiated above violently and vulgarly on the other side."

"The man rowed me over to a sinister shed between ships ... I crossed a lonely track and 100 meters in front of me the unambiguous lamp lit up the sky ... To the left of me ran a hedge; to the right, the impenetrable darkness of sheds and corners; and on both sides, the breath of quick, raw, silent crimes ... I arrived at the house with the arc light. A large inscription was written on it: 'Cinematografo para hombres solo.' The scene at its best! Before I went in, two gendarmes at the door searched my pockets. It was like a scene in a detective yarn ..."

"The screening was in progress. It was a large hall with a gallery running around the sides. A screen hung from the ceiling. On it the cinematographic theater played out its scenes ... While dull pricks

chased each other above, women roamed among the guests. Mostly Germans. The dregs of the world's brothels ..."

"It was so stupid, so immeasurably dull and absurd: the idiotic, tired and insolent wenches and the artificial vices on the screen above, which were to encourage lust. It was so irrational, so unconnectedly aberrant. A modern technical invention, lighting up the faces of men staring up out of the darkness, acted as a pacemaker for the cathouse, shortening the agitated and nervous trail into the chambers. Men and hookers disappeared noisily and quickly up the dark steps." (Moreck, pp. 180-82)

It seems as if viewing pornographic films has to do with a specific kind of bashfulness. But this bashfulness first has nothing to do with the legal or moral condemnation of pornography, and second, it is not connected to pornographic films' obvious purpose in a brothel. Even today, when the presentation of pornographic films in public theaters is detached from brothel operations, such feelings of shame still visibly exist and can only be insufficiently explained by the last remaining moral taboos. The same atmosphere of uneasiness and shame, excitement and repulsion which comes across in historical documents, is described in more recent reports. Gunter Kunert, for example, describes a visit to a porn house as follows:

"Silent men in darkness. No women between them. No throat-clearing. No coughing. Even the proverbial pin drop can't be heard. An assembly of the seemingly dead, so it seems, sitting on folding chairs, always two around a table, the greasy table top with a list of drinks illuminated from below and a call bell..."

"A trailer advertises next week's films: a fat, aging 'Herr Robert,' whose voice trails out of sync, snaps his fingers out of sync, followed by quick cuts of more or less naked girls parading in more or less seductive poses across the screen, presenting disproportionate bodies and faces, which radiate an aura of stupidity."

"Now a brandy. No one orders. No one smokes. No one breathes louder or heavier. The celluloid nymphs twist and turn and appear more alive than the live audience, which later after the feature — a Danish production on the complications and peculiarity of sex — leaves the cinema as quietly as they had occupied it: without a laugh, without audible consent or rejection."

"A kind of erotic phantom dissolves quickly and quietly, only compulsively to simulate physical life again, once a bell announces the next performance." (Kunert, pp.123-24)

If the porn cinema clientele is made up of human beings who act like zombies, voyeuristic pleasure in these cinemas must result from a situation involving the peeping tom's sense of secrecy. The voyeur likes to see but not to be seen. A lack of lust in porno cinemas apparently results from the aversion against being seen, while seeing. When the connection "cinema and brothel" still exists, when a modern technical invention [functions] as a "pacemaker for cat houses," then the

lack of lust and concomitant shame gets channeled into "stout and massive pleasure," into erotic transactions. Even today pornographic films fulfill this function. They promote not only a masturbatory "family cinema" but also are used as a part of prostitution and brothels. Besides this type though, a kind of blue movie has quite apparently developed which has no other purpose and goal other than that of satisfying the voyeur. While pornography's historical forms were at least partially integrated into the context of foreplay, this special way of viewing becomes abstracted to pure, completely self-consuming, voyeuristic lust.

Only by supposing such a specialized way of viewing can we explain the immense success of public pornographic movie houses, in spite of the displeasure they inflict on the zombie-like voyeur. In our age of visual culture, the active subjugating eye wins out in the world over the passive receptive sense organs, like our ears. We also see such a dominance of the visual demonstrated in the recently completed break between cinema and brothel. And pornography and prostitution are becoming fitting metaphors for aspects of our entire visual culture. When jobs demand nothing more of the body than keeping a watchful eye on the control board, then a one-man-cell peep show, possibly offering other services, becomes an adequate leisure area. Maybe in the history of pornographic cinema the films themselves have not changed as much as the organization of the senses. It is possible that the social environments in which the films are seen determine their effect more than the films' form and content. That is, the organization of the audience's sexuality defines the mode of the product's appropriation.

Although it is not certain whether pornographic films for heterosexuals and homosexuals are, aesthetically speaking, better or worse, they obviously encompass different modes of reception and appropriation. Tucholsky described audience response in the heterosexual porn film business when it was still connected to prostitution:

"Shouts, consoling voices, grunts, applause and encouraging cheers were heard. Somebody calls out comparable private experiences. Many made noise and yelled." (Moreck, p. 179)

Brendan Gill, writing about New York in the 1970s, describes a connection between homosexual porn theaters and an erotic practice that hardly exists in public heterosexual porn houses:

"For the homosexual, it is the accepted thing that the theater is there to be cruised in; this is one of the advantages he has purchased with his expensive ticket of admission...Far from sitting slumped motionless in one's chair, one moves about at will, sizing up possibilities. Often there will be found standing at the back of the theatre two or three young men, any of whom, for a fee, will accompany one to seats well down front and there practice upon one the same arts that are being practiced upon others on screen." (Gill, p. 11)

We also see that in the course of time, environments, stereotypes and characters change even in pornographic cinema in order to conform to newer fashions, especially about what is considered sexy. Early pornography, for example, attempted to please its well-to-do clientele by presenting erotic scenes involving servant girls and masters, thus capturing an everyday erotic fantasy. Newer

pornographic films depict other service trades. Newer films produced for public screening and sale also differ from older ones in that they more strictly follow the letter of the law and avoid certain specific erotic combinations which were shown in earlier, always illegal, films. According to Curt Moreck's description of pornography in the Weimar Republic and before, individual films differed according to country of origin and their supposed audiences:

"Pornographic films inform us about different erotic attitudes in individual countries. Thus French pornography surprisingly often presents excretory acts and indulges in lengthy depictions of foreplay, while intercourse itself often does not occur at all or is shifted behind the scenes. England, which produces such films mainly for South Africa and India, prefers flagellation scenes and the sadistic abuse of Blacks... Italy, whose southern region already belongs to the realm of Oriental [sic] sexuality cultivates the depiction of sodomy acts as a specialty while scenes of the sexual union of humans and animals were also popular. One says that in Germany sin is without grace, and indeed German pornographic films follow the rule. Without exception they show well-executed realistic coitus scenes; erotic animal scenes are on the other hand foreign to them. In order to broaden the proceedings, slightly kinkier sex is interjected once in a while." (Moreck, p. 183)

Apparently early pornographic films were divided into films which were set in a quasi-realistic milieu, thus referring to the customer's everyday life, and those films which were set in either a fantasy world or at least in an environment considered at the time to be a place of "secret" eroticism or foreign imperialist eroticism. While realistic films depicted masters and servants in bourgeois surroundings, fantasies often took place in harems and cloisters, etc. This dichotomy has apparently changed little, considering the HOUSEWIFE REPORTS, on the one hand, and such racist excursions into such exotic domains as Thailand in EMANUELLE, on the other. [Trans. note: HOUSEWIFE REPORTS are pornographic serials dealing with "typical" housewife affairs with the postman, gasman, etc.]

The blue movie genre has meanwhile become obviously more professional, so that the previous unintentional comic relief and unbelievable plots have given way to a routinely crafted presentation. Cinematography has become more skillful, the dramatic arousal curve more sophisticated. Cutting and other formal operations give the simple images more screen life. Even if we take into consideration that various ironic observations were used by historical commentators as defense mechanisms against their own shame and arousal, we can still conclude that early porn films were awkward amateur films made with little thought to the effects they could achieve cinematically:

"Now came SCENES IN A HAREM. One had to imagine the scene of the action taking place around a red light district because the empty mom's wall paper as well as curtains and rug fit the image. Fatima danced. The depraved girl slipped out of her pompous underwear and danced, i.e., she turned around comfortably while everyone admired her and she danced in front of her sultan, who lazily and idly lolled about in other concubines' laps. He was a bon vivant. The women fanned him with large Japanese paper fans, and on the table in front stood a glass for

Bavarian beer..."

"NUNNERY SECRETS and ANNA'S SIDELINE followed: Two perverse beauties rolled around on a carpet. One of them was a certain Emmy Raschke, as I discovered, who continuously laughed, probably because she thought the whole thing a bit funny. Well, they had all been hired to depict (cooly and very businesslike, with chiding remarks coming from the cameraman) those things which border on the heavenly, if one is to believe the audience..."

"Upstairs, THE COLONEL'S WIFE was in progress. It was photography come to life. While the honorable officer cheated on his wife with the lieutenant's wife, his wife made good use of the time with the colonel's orderly. They were, however, caught in the act, leading to slapped faces. One can say what one wants, the film was honest. However, the life of French soldiers does seem a little strange: the situations happened so quickly. Still there were two or three moments where the actors played their roles to the hilt. And even that was acted." (13)

Kurt Tucholsky describes here the realm of porn films which abstain from so-called perversions by limiting themselves to that which Curt Moreck considered typical for German blue movies: "well-executed realistic coitus scenes" and "sin without grace." (Moreck, pp. 17879)

Comical moments, described by Tucholsky as unintentional, occur often in the genre. We cannot assume that these comical aspects of old porn are merely a product of historical distance. Even today, numerous sex films pass as farce, dirty jokes, and witty commentary. So too in popular older forms comical moments played a significant role:

"Comic elements naturally play an important role in pornographic films because people use a humorous approach to various sexual procedures more than a serious or pathetic one. Films make use of this fact by showing people in sticky situations, how they are interrupted or embarrassed while taking care of bodily needs, or how they caught in awkward positions during intercourse." (Moreck, p. 183)

A "humorous approach to various sexual procedures" probably originates in sexual repression and carnal fear; laughter and vexed giggles are often a product of broken taboos. Still it seems as if comedy's continued existence within pornography is connected to the carnal pleasure of looking, of voyeurism itself. We laugh at the secret exposure of others. It is the same comic form in which TV producers and viewers consider "candid camera" funny.

Looking, cognition, pleasure. Glances and the pleasure of looking. On the autonomy of our senses.

What's new in pornographic cinema is obviously its establishment and existence as a voyeuristic amusement park. It promises nothing more or less than it advertises: the carnal pleasure of looking without a social connection to erotic action. This can be observed not only in the large industrial metropoli, but also in the provinces and in the daily changing programs of boring motels. Whoever, with good and

honorable intentions, reproaches blue movies for dishonestly manipulating the poor consumer — because these films deny him true and real sexuality and short change him with illusory gratification — is literally pinning the donkey's tail on the wrong end. Such a critic assumes the primacy of genital lust over those archaic inclinations such as voyeurism, looking, and what the Germans call *Schaulust*. [*Schaulust* must be translated as the pleasure of looking, as in satisfying one's curiosity like a "tourist," but the word also carries erotic connotations, involving the "lust to see" and carnal pleasure — JCH.]

The heterosexual consumer who buys his ticket at the door doesn't expect and probably doesn't even want to experience sexual gratification through another person. Like Mr. Chance in Hal Ashby's film comedy, *BEING THERE* (1980), the porn film patron especially wants "to watch." The criticism of pornography thus misses the mark when it assumes that something else is expected, that the goods were paid for but not delivered. Customer fraud hardly explains blue movies' success.

While having improved over heavy and awkward predecessors, the quality of today's porn films explains this success even less, since these films in no way match the formal standards of other genres. The latest attempts to make porn "serious" by providing the genre with stars, festivals, and directors should probably be seen as a self-conscious guild's legitimizing efforts, rather than just as snares to capture a wider audience. For the blue movie trend continues to expand even without all the hype.

The trend toward pornography, in my opinion, relates to a broader development of how our society organizes the senses. Porn houses are not the motor but the chassis. There is a likely explanation for the expansion of pornographic cinema and its function within the context of ruling-class sexual organization. For example in "Die Schaubühne" (1913), Walter Serner, overwhelmed by the new invention of cinema, commented:

"However, all that fails to explain the unprecedented victory march the cinema experiences everywhere. What is going on must lie deeper than we ever expected. And if we look in the direction of where the money is coming from, into those strangely flickering eyes that reach far back into human history, suddenly we see it as obvious: "Schaulust." Not only the harmless kind, involving movement, color or both, but that kind which entails a terrible lust, as violent as the deepest. It is the kind that makes blood boil and heads spin until that unfathomably powerful excitement common to all lust races through the flesh..."

This ghastly pleasure in seeing atrocities, fighting, and death lies dormant in us all. It makes us rush into the morgue, to the scene of the crime, behind every chase, to every street fight. It pays good money to cruise around sodomy. That is what draws the masses into the cinemas as if they were possessed. [Cinema] here offers the masses that which expanding civilization continues daily to rob from them, that which neither the magic of the stage, nor the tired sensations of a circus, music hall or cabaret performance can attempt to replace. Here the masses get it all in all its old glory: *Schaulust*." (Serner, pp.53-54)

Serner prophetically anticipates that cinema's attraction lies in a New-like

pleasure: being able to participate from the bleachers in an epoch's atrocities. Such *Schaulust* ferments the popular mixture of what critics call "sex and crime." While societies have long permitted the depiction of brutal violence, hate, war, crime, destruction, and death, many have not permitted the presentation of naked bodies and sex. Now it is no wonder that with the breakdown of sexual taboos, cinema has now seized upon sex as a subject to satisfy the urge to look. Up until now it was possible to see every imaginable kind of killing. Now 99 or 150 or x ways of making love will appear on the screen. "*Schaulust*" Serner describes as a violent, eruptive lust, finally able to desecrate culture. But *Schaulust* is not an isolated, primordial phenomenon but rather is a developed and structured way of perceiving and feeling and occurs through the process of creating a highly rationalized and thoroughly organized society. Porn houses' current success is a product of this cultural-historical imprint rather than a product of primordial lust:

"The eye is an organ constantly under stress, working, concentrating, always unequivocally interpreting. The ear, on the other hand, is more diffuse and passive. Unlike an eye, you don't have to open it first."
(Adorno and Eisler, p. 43)

"The eye has adapted to bourgeois rationality and ultimately to a highly industrial order, by accustoming itself to interpreting reality, a priori, as a world of objects, really as a world of commodities; the ear has achieved nothing similar." (Adorno and Eisler, p. 41)

"Such a division of labor between the receptive capabilities of human beings, a specialization of the senses, was necessary for a particular stage of capitalist production, i.e., the stage referred to in the context of the production process as "Taylorism." (Negt and Kluge, p.237)

Taylor invented the systematic categorization of the work process, and this shaped industrial design and the rationalizing of work. In the age of Taylorism, a sudden and drastic rise in pornography became obvious in Victorian England. In fact this interest did not directly result from the great Victorian taboo on sexuality in a so-called pressure cooker effect. The dissemination of pornography is rather connected to specific social aspects of modernization efforts, as well as to changes developing in a parallel way in perceptual apparatuses and psychic mechanisms. In a certain respect pornographic cinema both symptomizes this development and expresses it. Training the eye means socially adapting the senses of sight to strategies of rationalization and modernization. This also occurs at the level of the organization of sexual urges and thus corresponds to an expansion of voyeurism. Sexuality becomes aligned with this social/perceptual development.

The connection between power, control and sex can only be made via changes in sexuality itself. Pornography may be a porous membrane through which power penetrates into the inner regions of sexuality while sexuality flows outwardly, becoming an element of power. Michel Foucault analyzes the way power and sex dovetail in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* without, however, viewing the matter in a simple active/passive repression equation:

"The appearance of diverse perversions isn't sexuality's malicious revenge on power, which in turn imposes the suppression of excess... The appearance of perversion is an instrumental effect: by isolating,

intensifying and strengthening peripheral sex, power's relationship to sex and pleasure is fragmented and increased, traversing the body and penetrating behavior. And the advancement of power brings with it the establishment of diverse sexualities, which fasten themselves to an age, a place, a style, a type of practice. Reproducing sexuality by expending power; this chain of incalculable economic profit had been ensured since the 19th century, and is derived simultaneously from an analytic multiplication of lust and an increase in its controlling power, thanks to the mediation of medicine, psychiatry, prostitution and pornography. Lust and power neither cancel themselves out, nor do they conflict, rather they overlap, chasing and propelling each other. They enmesh by virtue of complex and positive mechanisms of arousal and stimulation." (Foucault, pp. 64-65)

Contemporary sexuality, according to Foucault, is influenced by the "drive for knowledge" or power. Pornography thus becomes nothing more than the "drive for knowledge," the night school for sex education, so to speak. A discourse on power takes place by means of voyeurism; it is also a cognitive urge. In fact, numerous studies on the social history of pornography indicate that pornography producers have always perceived themselves as contributing to sex research. Indeed the whole current pornography film wave in Germany began with films which advertised sex education (e.g., the Dr. Kolle series), which perceived themselves as practical self-help guides and as providers of knowledge. The taxonomy and classification of forms of knowledge still clings to an unending series of "Reports," often presenting sexual behavior according to various occupations. Even the earliest porn attempted lexicographic forays, as an eyewitness noticed:

"The true life presentation of every imaginable perversion constitutes a particular spice in obscene films. Although life itself very often offers the connoisseur a view of simple vice, the chance to enjoy real perversity as a spectator is much rarer; in this case, film tries to fill the gap. Films exist in this genre, which seem to have been created with Krafft-Ebing's book, *Psychopathia sexualis*, in hand, constituting a manual of abnormal sexual operations for civilized man." (Moreck, p. 182)

"Every sin of man flickered on [the screen]. The 150 ways of loving, as illustrated in old treatises, were demonstrated, with interruptions for lesbian, pederastic and masturbatory jokes. All that was harmless. Sadists and masochists waved their instruments: sodomy was practiced, coprophagous acts were on display. Nothing was held back, everything occurred in an inane reality, which became provokingly vulgar through the artificial reproduction of mechanics." (Moreck, p. 181)

The drive for knowledge activates the eye, turning its attention to sex. "Schaulust" as a cognitive instrument, cognition as "Schaulust." Pornography discovers its social role. Psychoanalytic theory supports the concept of a connection between curiosity, cognition and voyeurism in individual development — even before pornography revealed this connection by becoming a significant and typical product of our society. The optical organization of reality implies control — whether from the hunter's vigilant eye or "the great eye of the government"

(Foucault). Jean-Paul Sartre notes in *L'Être et le néant*:

"...the idea of discovery, of revelation, includes an idea of appropriative enjoyment. What is seen is possessed; to see is to deflower...More than this, knowledge is a hunt. Bacon called it the hunt of Pan. The scientist is the hunter who surprises a white nudity and who violates by looking at it. Thus the totality of these images reveals something which we shall call the Acteon complex...A person hunts for the sake of eating. Curiosity in an animal is either sexual or alimentary. To know is to devour with the eyes." (Sartre, p. 578)

Let us assume the correctness of Foucault's thesis, that the history of sex is based on a drive for knowledge and concede that pornography is a nexus in this transfer of sex and power. If we also consider another point made by Sartre, we might be able to explain why the pornographic cinema today is a medium for conveying knowledge (in Foucault's sense) rather than a medium for aesthetic experience. Sartre assumes a difference between art and cognition, implying different relationships to appropriation. Art works resist possession.

"The mind is continually creating it [art], and yet it stands alone and indifferent to that creation." (Sartre, p.578)

Cognition, on the other hand, consists of an appropriation act, thus incorporating the object of cognition and assimilating it:

"Knowledge is at one and the same time a penetration and a superficial caress, a digestion, and the contemplation from afar of an object which will never lose its form." (Sartre, pp. 579-80)

Sartre analyzes cognition as assimilation, its limit being reached when desire destroys its object, instead of preserving it through appropriation: You can't have your cake and eat it too! It seems to me that Sartre's analysis of cognition as penetration and aloof observation also characterizes the appropriation process in pornographic films. If the viewer allows her/himself to be carried away by the desire to possess, thus relinquishing the position of an aloof observer, then s/he must sacrifice her/his *Schaulust* in order to make a specific moment or a certain image his/her own while the next image and sensation on the screen has already appeared. The observer is thus caught between these two modes of appropriating, perception and cognition. It's like Buridan's hungry ass of old caught between two tasty piles of hay:

"When looking at a porn magazine, I'm not bothered by the subject's visualization, even if the men and women are ugly or something else is not quite right. In my fantasies they exist in a way that excites me. Besides, I can always calmly choose what I want to see, put it aside or turn it to a certain page...The blue movie patron always remains alienated from the situation he's observing, because he has to keep his clothes on." (Kockner, p. 17)

In the relation between voyeurism and masturbation, obviously the print media and cinemas differ in degree of privacy offered for masturbation. Biologically orgasm is tied to the genitalia, but even when the orgasm functions physically, here

its psychic organization is determined by the peeping eye. Whether male viewers masturbate or not in a porn theater, their pleasure is organized around looking at coitus. The famous English psychoanalyst, Michael Balint, wrote about perversions in relation to the physical fact of genital orgasm. Thus if men or women masturbate during or after the film, or not at all, it is only a question of degree. The stimulus is in the looking.

Symptoms for this theoretical observation can be observed in pornographic amateur films. Robert van Acken collected amateur films in German showing vacations, private life, and sexual activity. He called his denunciatory compilation PRIVATE GERMANY (1980). The films, formally far inferior to the standards achieved by today's blue movies, nevertheless feed on the latter for their fantasies.

Pornographic ideas and mise-en-scene become naturalistically documented by a super-8 camera in fact, it seems that, in contrast to more elegant professional porn, the acts are being executed only for the camera. A distressed woman lolls about on a coffee table, another models erotic underwear. Pleasure seems minimal; the liveliest part of these bodies comes from their eager gaze into the camera. The documenting camera creates the show; it's like how Mr. Chance thinks he can turn of reality's unpleasant programming by using his TV remote control. The assimilation of filmic, pornographic fantasies once again becomes alienated from erotic practice. These films do not depict erotic practice but rather how people have assimilated the depiction of sex. Pornographic movies beget pornographic movies.

Shadows and fright, deficiency and abundance — pornography's realm

A widespread system of pornographic cinemas emerged in most western countries after the great liberalization; it came as a result of sex being permeated by societal power. Furthermore, in pornographic cinema, instrumental rationality cuts sensuality down to its size. Male vision, as found in porn films, shows the body as an instrument for experiencing and maximizing pleasure. Human beings seem monadistic individuals (strictly according to bourgeois ideology) whose actions are guided by the principle of experiencing as much pleasure as possible.

Lust's perpetual motion, as produced by pornographic cinema, originates in this arena. Everything becomes an instrument for sensual pleasure: the body, hairbrushes, dildos, or bananas. Every situation leads to sex-car breakdowns, the beach, the carwash, or the office party. Bodies are connected according to mathematical equations; orgies are played out like dominos. What Horkheimer and Adorno write about de Sade can also be applied to blue movies.

"That which Kant establishes transcendently, namely the affinity of cognition and planning, stamping every aspect of bourgeois existence with the seal of inescapable functionalism (even the thoroughly rationalized coffee breaks) — de Sade describes empirically more than 100 years before the invention of sports. Modern sports, played according to exact rules, so that no individual team member is left in doubt as to his role, every player having a reserve on the bench, finds its objective correlative in Juliette's sexual team where not a single moment is inactive, no bodily orifice neglected, no bodily function left untried." (Horkheimer and Adorno, p. 108)

In fact, newer pornographic films demonstrate great advances, especially in the area of gymnastic-artistic formations. Technical presentations have evolved from "perverse beauties rolling around on a carpet" to group orgies, and the combinations call attention to themselves through athletic self-control and simultaneous sexual achievement. The aesthetic forms of blue movie rely on a fundamental metaphor of the body as a machine. Cuts are utilized in order to exchange tired bodies with freshly pounding ones or those which have been refurbished in the interim. Cuts also create movement artificially when sexual athletes have exhausted themselves.

The performers' interchangeability and anonymity function as a material correlative to their expressed ideology. There is no room anymore for the old fashioned clumsiness of a giggling Emmy Raschke because heavy duty professionals are now at work, producing through a taylorized procedure body components for the final product while maintenance brigades with spare parts take care of breakdowns. These production maneuvers are of no interest to the viewer; the rapid reality of aroused penises, wide-open mouths, spread-eagled thighs, and stretched vulvas is hardly perceived. It is just like the wig changes of female performers who appear one moment as blonde equestrians in a family circus and then as red-headed lesbians the next.

The most sophisticated porno films are structured in a way that builds the keyhole perspective of the voyeur right into the film. A number of "fucks" thereby become dramatically organized through parallel montage, thus counteracting battle fatigue which invariably sets in when the camera presents an entire coition without interruption. The latter usually leaves the impression of being hard work rather than pleasure. Pornographic cinema lies at the end of a development in society involving specialization and compartmentalization. Pornography itself is a part of this specialization through the increasing autonomy of *Schaulust*.

All this operates in accordance with a further compartmentalization of pornography as a commodity, since producers speculate on the consumer's presumed or actual taboos and needs. Homosexuality does not turn up in heterosexual porno houses and vice versa. In heterosexual porn, anal eroticism only arises between men and women, and the only way a man gets close to another man is when a woman, who gets it both ways, lies sandwiched between them. Lesbian sex is also finally invisible, because when women touch each other, it is only because they are waiting for a man or performing for a male voyeur. Besides, they usually use dildos and suck cock, thus remaining within the limits of phallically oriented sexuality.

However, criticism of pornography's new forms, especially its filmic forms, remains uncomfortable. Despite porn film's already routinely executed, socialized sex, something still clings to pornographic cinema which Siegfried Kracauer in *Theory of Film* called "phenomena overwhelming consciousness":

Elemental catastrophes, the atrocities of war, acts of violence and terror, sexual debauchery, and death are events which tend to overwhelm consciousness. In any case, they call forth excitements and agonies bound to thwart detached observation. No one witnessing such an event, let alone playing an active part in it, should therefore be expected accurately to account for what s/he has seen. Since these manifestations of crude nature, human or otherwise, fall into the area of

physical reality, they comprise all the more cinematic subjects. Only the camera is able to represent them without distortion..."

"The cinema, then, aims at transforming the agitated witness into a conscious observer. Nothing could be more legitimate than its lack of inhibition in picturing spectacles which upset the mind. Thus it keeps us from shutting our eyes to the 'blind drive of things.'" (Kracauer, pp. 5758)

Kracauer points to the possibility that only through the image's distance is a reconciliation with such objects imaginable, recuperating them from mere functionalism. There is a one dimensionality of the optical possession of the world. This flatness is reflected in and enacted by pornographic cinema, making it even more scintillating and enticing than any warranted and proven ideological criticism of it has been able to deal with.

"One must learn to read between the gaping flesh and vulvas, against the grain, in other words, like a code of prohibition and carnal denial... But the total iconography of unlived life, of anti-eroticism in capitalist systems discloses its presence to the person who remains sensitive to pornography's debasement, dirtiness, vulgarity and brutality, who has seen its brazen grin..." (Gorsen, p. 1104)

Whoever learns to read pornographic films against the grain, like Peter Gorsen above, will not only find such "a code of prohibitions and carnal denial." In the sense that the cinema effects what reality denies, he/she will also recognize the wounds which "the code of prohibition and carnal denial" has inflicted on desire. Those wounds exist not outside of but inside pornography's iconography, which expresses them rather than covers them up. Even in the machine-like availability and exchangeability of bodies in their crude naturalism in blue movies lies a wish for a realm beyond sacrifice, one where milk and honey flows. Steven Marcus traces the historical context of this imagery back to economics in his key study on sex and pornography in Victorian England:

"The fantasies that are at work here have to do with economics; the body is regarded as a productive system with only a limited amount of material at its disposal. And the model on which the notion of semen is formed is clearly that of money..."

"Furthermore, the economy envisaged in this idea is based on scarcity and has as its aim the accumulation of its own product. And the fantasy of pornography, as we shall have ample opportunity to observe, is this idea's complement, for the world of pornography is a world of plenty. In it all men are infinitely rich in substance, all men are limitlessly endowed with that universal fluid currency which can be spent without loss. Just as in the myth Zeus descends upon Danae in a shower of gold, so in pornography the world is bathed, floated, flooded, inundated in this magical produce of the body." (Marcus, p. 22)

While pornographic fantasies of abundance in English Victorianism are correlated to the objective overtly within England, which was still in the process of acquiring mercantile riches, the endless flow of semen and the bodies of women covered with

and rubbed in sperm point to pornographic cinema's one deficiency: the body itself. In pornographic fantasy everyone is perceived within a world of machines, of meshed systems and cogs. But the fantasy always shows the body's subjugation. The body suffers from deficiency while paced in a sea of material plenty.

Today pornographic film no longer refers to meanings lying outside its own subject matter; it refers primarily to itself through visual system, to that which can be seen on the screen: bodies and their carnal pleasure. From this perspective, the problem raised in Part II must be addressed again. What is seen? What form of sexuality can be visualized? I will attempt to answer this question in the next section, which deals with the iconography of visible penises and invisible vaginas in gender-specific pornographic imagery. However, first I will attempt to elucidate the distance between observer and observed phenomena, the distance created by the camera.

Kracauer believes distance is necessary in order to ease the fear that would arise should phenomena overwhelm the spectator. Pornography obviously plays off of a certain fear of crudity, coarseness, and sex — a fear which it does not dissemble or sublimate. The observer can confront that which frightens him/her only through the image. It is a process akin to an individual's dreams with the camera becoming a medium for creating distance and harmless voyeurism:

"I observe, but am not involved, like a camera. At a narrow spot in a dark cave I look through the camera and film a scene. I see a large scorpion, while somebody outside tries to kill it. It's four or five feet long. The guy outside throws sand into the cave with hand and feet, moving it back and forth — so sexually. He hurls a cold, poisoned lobster's tail as bait, so the scorpion won't bite him. Jesus, what a dream! I filmed the battle of the two clowns. It's dangerous and unpleasant." (Altman, p. 121)

This dream, as related by a patient to his psychiatrist, reflects quite well the camera and voyeurism's mechanism for exculpation; it is interpreted by the psychoanalyst as fear of sex. (The camera played a role not only in the dreams of his patient, but also in his erotic everyday reality. He took pictures of his girlfriend during their mischievous sex games.) Correspondences with the procedures of pornographic voyeurism can thus be found at the level of individual psychology. Such everyday examples demonstrate just how deeply imbedded such organizational forms of the perceptual apparatus are. Thus it is hardly possible to talk about this "influence" originating in the simple content of pornographic cinema in the way conservatives would like to in order to defend censorship.[1][[open notes in new window](#)]

Looking, as a form of sexual curiosity probing an undiscovered sexuality, requires distance in order to ease the fear of the unknown. Some literary works utilize shadow metaphors to create the necessary distance between observer and observed. This need has a common base. We can see in the following literary example, written by Peter Weiss, from another point of view, the sexual observer's wish for distance:

"The shadow of the housekeeper's legs, as she lay with her back on the table, rose with bended knees above the coachman's creeping shadow, and the shadow of the coachman, resting on his knees, rose above the

shadow of the housekeeper's stomach. The shadow of the coachman's hands reached under the shadow of the housekeeper's skirts, the shadow of the skirt slipped down and the shadow of the coachman's abdomen burrowed into the shadow of the housekeeper's exposed thighs. The shadow of the coachman's arm dug into the shadow of his crotch and pulled out a pole-like shadow, which in form and length matched his tool; he thrust this protruding shadow into the heavy, well-rounded shadow of the housekeeper's groin; alter the shadow of the housekeeper's legs had lifted themselves onto the shadow of the coachman's shoulders." (Weiss, pp. 98-99)

Here Peter Weiss presents the schematic, the stereotypical, and the projection of persons and identities within body movements. He offers a voyeuristic experience through the literary form of an endless genitive flowing action. The same schematization remains a mindless characteristic in pornographic films, where it is reproduced blindly. The transformation of persons into facsimiles based on previously existing patterns refers even in pornographic cinema to the yearning for a sex life. But it does not postulate a union of "mature personality" and "genital sex":

"It's a bit of sexual utopia not to be oneself, also not to love only one mistress: to negate self. It undermines that invariable aspect of bourgeois society, in the widest sense, which has always been geared towards integration, the call for identity..."

"With the growing social acknowledgment of genitalia, the repression of special drives and their representatives increases in genital relations. What remains is cultivated as socialized voyeurism or anticipation. It exchanges the unification with one person for the observation of all, and thus it expresses sexuality's tendency to socialization, in itself an aspect of its deadly integration." (Adorno, pp. 105-105)

The constant change of environments so predominant in the pornographic movie scene and the masks and costumes belonging to the paraphernalia of anonymous lust are possibly the last signs of a search for non-identity in sex. The proletarian captain of a riverboat in a blue movie promises a certain aggressive ingredient involving "a strong hand"; the "duchess of porn" in a black evening gown offers a touch of French decadence; and the cloistered student is surrounded with the scent of sadomasochistic flagellation orgies at the confession pew. The secret codes of environments hide lust's special drives and the specificity of those drives finally disappears in the close-up depiction of genitalia's "straight-to-the-point" gymnastic primacy.

Continued on [page 2](#)

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

On pornographic cinema

by Gertrud Koch

page 2

from *Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, pp. 17-29

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1990, 2006

The secret of the invisible penis and woman's other place

Criticism of pornographic cinema was originally founded on conservative moral criticism. Today, after the great liberalization, it is being expressed in actions and analysis by feminists. However, feminist criticism of pornography basically has a different intent from that of conservative moralists. Feminists protest because pornographic cinema expresses and confirms existing norms rather than undermine them. Porn reduces sexuality to a male perspective, involving patriarchal myths regarding female sex and the phallus. In short, pornographic cinema is sexist. Feminists understand that sexism prevents the emancipation of sexuality, an emancipation which would liberate women's sexual fantasies and bring to a deserved end the phallogocentric primacy of ruling class sexual structures. Feminist arguments thus do not strive for a conservative preservation of old values but for revolutionary change, and the arguments often arise from women's sexual and political liberation strategies.

In the face of the dominant sexual misery, it is difficult to object to the intentions which form the basis of feminist criticism against pornography. One can however object to strategies and arguments which make a direct connection between viewing pornographic films and sex acts according to the following pattern: that whoever views sadistic blue movies sees these as behavioral possibilities and as an invitation to rape and sadistically torture women; that whoever sees phallic omnipotence fantasies confirmed in wide-screen will hardly be able to act differently in reality.

The direct effect of filmic action on human behavior has never been proven. In my opinion, we can make the connection only in a social context and not directly in terms of behavioral psychology. In contrast to the above argument, I assume that pornography does not so much express dominant male sexual practice as it expresses its deficiencies, restructuring damaged fantasies. Although legislative and executive prosecution and punishment is no longer widespread, pornographic subculture still maintains an aura of the secret and forbidden, the sensational and the never-before-seen. It advertises the extra-ordinary rather than the everyday. The exceptional rather than the common. A porn house in London dreamt up the following text, displayed in front of the theater:

"WARNING"

"This cinema is showing pornographic films depicting close-ups of sexual intercourse, oral sex, and male and female masturbation and is not for the easily shocked." (Ellis, p. 103)

The shock, the fright used warningly to advertise recalls Kracauer's "phenomena overwhelming consciousness." For pornographic cinema, this shock seems to be a component of voyeuristic lust. But what's so terrible? Are sex organs and copulating couples really terrifying? Where does the fright leading to fascination come from? Feminist arguments overlap with psychoanalytical ones in analyzing this question because both assume the primacy of male sexuality in pornographic films.

According to Freud's analysis, there is close connection between *Schaulust* and castration fears: a male child, seeing a woman's sex organ for the first time in his life, is surprised because a penis is not attached. Disturbed by the fact that such an important item for him is missing from the female organ, he imagines a number of equally fear-arousing possibilities: (a) the female organ is the result of castration or (b) women hide their penises. The second possibility (b) is already a working out of the fears induced by possibility of (a). Out of this aspect of the castration complex there arises an indefatigable voyeuristic mania to inspect a woman's sex continuously and exactly in order to uncover the secret of the missing penis. The mature viewer of pornographic films searches for a confirmation of his childish sex theory involving phallic mythology about the female sex. Since his mania is the product of a castration complex, the viewing of numerous penises confirms their functional efficiency and intactness.

Furthermore, seeing many penises eases this primal male fear through the feeling of phallic omnipotence. The indefatigable search for that which cannot be found, namely a woman's penis, is accompanied by a parallel, compensatory pacification of fears through the exhibition of erections and potency.

The endless merry-go-around of sex orgies; the reduction of persons to sex organs; the mechanical and compulsive repetition of action in pornographic films—these thus originate in male sexual structures rather than in a lack of imagination. Following a secret rite, a naked body awaits at every corner and in every moment is conjured up by the imagination. It happens as fantasy does in the magical and archaic world of a child, where space and time have been freed from the net of the physical world. As if following a magical order, the everyday place becomes a secret site of sexuality. The world of pornographic films creates its pyramids of gymnasts on an archaic ground: on a child-like, archaic theory of sex.

John Ellis has shown that in the voyeuristic circle of pornographic films, the invisible female penis must be transformed into a visible fetish, so that lust can overcome castration fears:

"The fetish offered by these representations is no longer a fragment of clothing, or even the deceptively smooth body of the phallic woman, it is now the woman's sexual pleasure. The woman nevertheless has the phallus in sexual pleasure; the woman's lack of a phallus is disavowed in her orgasm...In orgasm woman no longer is the phallus, she has the phallus. Films currently produced within the pornographic sector gain

their impulsion from the repetition of instances of female sexual pleasure, and male pleasure is perfunctory in most cases. The films (and photographs) are concerned with the 'mise-en-scene' of the female orgasm; they constantly circle around it, trying to find it, to abolish the spectator's separation from it." [2][[open notes in new window](#)]

The transformation of the empirical penis into a mythic, symbolic phallus, becoming a fetishistic image, a sign for the existence of female orgasm, signifies the transformation process, whereby something invisible becomes visible in the fetish. It is true that many pornographic films give particular weight to the mise-en-scene of codes signifying female orgasm. Yet the next problem arises here, regarding the relationship between the visible and invisible. For the place where a woman is supposed to have a penis and orgasm is just as invisible as the phantom phallus men search for.

Naturalistic pornographic film's lack of expressiveness necessarily reaches its limit literally "ante portas," before achieving its goal of seeing the secret place of woman's pleasure. Dennis Giles describes the same in a psychoanalytic essay on pornographic films:

"The interior space she encloses (identified as the woman in essence) is an invisible place...it cannot be possessed by visual knowledge. In order to emphasize its separation from the known space of the pornographic film, I call this central interior the Other place." (Giles)

The invisible, other place, affirmed by pornographic films without showing it, can be made visible through pornographic language. Steven Marcus impressively affirms it in a description of the female body as a landscape, found in his Max Weberian construction of an ideal "Pornotopia":

"Farther down, the scene narrows and changes in perspective. Off to the right and left jut two smooth snowy ridges. Between them, at their point of juncture, is a dark wood — we are now at the middle of our journey. This dark wood — sometimes it is called a thicket — is triangular in shape. It is also like a cedar cover, and in its midst is a dark romantic chasm. In this chasm the wonders of nature abound. From its top there depends a large, pink stalactite, which changes shape, size, and color in accord with the movement of the tides below and within. Within the chasm — which is roughly pearshaped — there are caverns measureless to man, grottoes, hermits' caves, underground streams — a whole internal and subterranean landscape. The climate is warm but wet. Thunder storms are frequent in this region, as are tremors and quakings of the earth. The walls of the cavern often heave and contract in rhythmic violence, and when they do the salty streams that run through it double their flow. The whole place is dark yet visible. This is the center of the earth and the home of man." (Marcus, pp. 274-75)

In film this literary utopian other place remains invisible. A woman's carnal pleasure is simulated by exterior signs; only the penis is visible in pornographic films, and on it falls the burden of carnal proof. Hardly ever do we see a coition that doesn't end with a penis ejaculating on a woman. The abundance of sperm once again becomes a sign of deficiency, a deficiency of depiction. Still, the sight of an

ejaculating penis seems to be erotic for the male viewer because it is a sign of intactness, an assurance that the vagina, imagined to be insatiable and dangerous, has released its victim unharmed into the world of light. The choice of naturalistic forms of depiction in blue movies is thus also made in order to guarantee sensual certainty in regards to uncastratedness. In this way, the visual depiction by convention sacrifices the woman's pleasure; the actress must simulate orgasm when the penis is already outside her.

The psychic codification of sexuality can be seen even in the naturalistic habits of pornographic films. In fact, films are never pure images but always symbolic structurings of that which is portrayed. We can now expand the definition formulated in Part II. I identified pornographic cinema with cognition, as an instrument of people's drive for knowledge. Now I'll include an inner psychic level: pornographic cinema is the night school of childish sexual theory. Finally, though, such definitions remain inadequate. If our analysis measures pornographic film with the yardstick of psychopathology, we come to the conclusion that infantile, perverse male sex fantasies are at work. In a clinical diagnostic sense, this is certainly correct. Feminist criticism against pornographic films here can find its most valid objections.

But psychopathological analysis, based exclusively on a reconstruction of the male sexual perspective, cannot explain women's response. Many women also make the journey to "Pornotopia" (Hans and Lapouge, p. 204) with "disgusted and fascinated gaze,"[3] in spite of warranted moral and critical indignation. The pleasure of looking, as an exploration of both the unknown and one's own sex, certainly is a common pleasure. Not only men experience the desire to return to the womb as well as have narcissistic fusion and exchange fantasies. The idea of promiscuous abundance, saturating the images in pornographic films, is not only present at the level of symbolic abstraction. All those visible, concrete penises and vulvas do not just represent a symbolic phallus. Although always caught in a symbolic and social discourse, film images never quite free themselves from the resistance of the concrete world of objects, which they then transfer visually to a symbolic world.[4]

Even if all these genitalia and individual bodies are symbolically and unequivocally part of male sexual fantasy, and even if they really are experienced by the abstract, generalizing mania of male perception within the systematic context of the symbolic organization of a phallically centered world, they also still exist as images of details. Their depth is real and empirical, as the naturalistic pornographic film never tires of telling us. Female perception is thus possibly not really integrated into a phallic discourse which can never be woman's own. Maybe women have enough imagination, in the face of an abstract male organization of perception, to move about outside the inscribed symbolic discourse.

"Pornotopia" would then become a fragmented world, the schism of the sexes running through it, the phallus disavowing it fearfully. "Pornotopia" then becomes the empire of a phallic ruler, who is powerless against the female view of details; they partition his empire according to their own taste. The woman's view of pornographic films, "disgusted and fascinated" as it were, does not have to search and find a phallus behind every penis.

That women react ambivalently to pornographic films, torn between fascination

and disappointment, maybe occurs not only because of a prudish upbringing, which forbids an open view and results in a defensive and loathsome stance. Maybe women still have the possibility of taking a utopian view of "Pornotopia," despite their criticism — i.e., if they can recognize that utopian abundance is not to be found in phallic generalization, but rather in the details of a flickering world of objects; their gaze creates flesh and blood out of a shadow world of bodies. The concrete criticism and reception of pornographic cinema, as demonstrated in interviews conducted with women by Marie-Françoise Hans and Gilles Lapouge[5], illustrate more than just women's insufficient understanding of porn's objective content, they also illustrate another kind of appropriation, a kind of reflection in fragments. Even when women smash pornographic cinema into pieces, they bring more light into these fragments than the whole can possibly offer: a different sexuality is as much a part of radical-feminist, negative criticism of pornographic movies as it is of the uncritical, appropriating gaze of its male patrons.

Notes

1. In connection with these problems compare Volkmar Sigusch's summary of the *Pornography Report*. Quoted in Gorsen, p. 108110.

2. Ellis, p. 103. Ellis' analysis takes its cue from Laura Mulvey's study, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

3. If one strictly defines pornographic cinema as a medium oriented solely toward the depiction of male sexuality, then one still has to explain why women are not necessarily turned off by such depictions. They will hardly find an image of their own sexuality, unless we accept Freud's assumption of penis envy, which presupposes that the heterosexual, phallically-oriented female identifies with the penis and its lust. The penis envy thesis, so vehemently opposed by feminist theoreticians, will not be discussed here further, although I'm inclined to accept its historical, if not its universal, anthropological validity.

It might be helpful to look at Freud's assumption regarding a basic bisexuality, which characterizes not only men but also women. In his late works Freud went so far as to state the biological bisexuality might contradict his penis envy theory. If we imagine that the strict schism between male/female, phallus/vulva is actually a relation, whereby each sex incorporates repressed elements of the other, then we might have an explanation of why women can discover at least a portion of themselves in "pornotopia." Viewing a penis would then also imply a degree of lust for women, and it would not only mean subjugation in the face of phallic power of identification with the oppressor. This would, of course, mean that we women have to free ourselves from such constructs as "evil," "destructive," and "misogynist" perversions, while at the same time attempting to study the utopian and anti-establishment contents of these perversions before clinically disqualifying them.

4. Compare Kracauer, p. 57-58. Kracauer's essentialist film theory, oriented as it were on phenomenology, is centrally concerned with the idea of film as a redemption of physical reality, as found in the "flow of life." Even if one doesn't agree with Kracauer's philosophical precepts, one can hardly disregard the fact that Kracauer has defined one of the basic tenants of film aesthetics: the preservation of the physical representation of objects which film captures as a physical image and not just as an imaginary image the way the painting might. Film according to

Kracauer was — and this definition seems to me to hold true for porn — "the trembling upper world in a dirty puddle."

5. See Note 39. Compare Gertrud Koch, 1979, pp. 116-38. Koch's theoretical essays on women's responses to film have been published in English in JUMP CUT (Koch, 1982 and 1989).

Works cited

Adorno, Theodor W. "Sexualaltabus und Recht Heute." *Eingriffe — Neue kritische Modelle*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1963.

Adorno, Theodor W. and Eisler, Hans. *Komposition für den Film*. Munich: Roger & Bernhard, 1969.

Altman, Leon L. *Praxis der Traumdeutung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1981.

Ellis, John. "On Pornography." *Screen*, 21, No. 1. London, Spring 1980.

Giles, Dennis. "Pornographic Space: The Other Place." "Film-Historical Theoretical Speculations," *The 1977 Film Studies Annual, Part Two*. Pleasantville, NY, 1977.

Gill, Brendan. "Blue Notes." *Film Comment*, 9, No. 1, 1973.

Gorsen, Peter. *Sexualästhetik. Zur bürgerlichen Rezeption von Obszönität und Pornographie*. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag, 1972.

Foucault, Michel. *Sexualität und Wahrheit. Erster Band, Der Wille zum Wissen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1979.

Fraenkel, Heinrich. *Unsterblicher Film, die grosse Chronik von der Laterna Magica bis zum Tonfilm*. Munich: Kindler Verlag, 1956.

Hans, Marie-Françoise and Lapouge, Gilles. *Die Frauen — Pornographie und Erotik*. Neuwied: Luchterhand Verlag, 1979.

Horkheimer, Max and Adorno, Theodor W. "Juliette oder Aufklärung 'böse Lust.'" *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. Raubdruck.

Koch, Gertrud. "Female Sensuality: Past Joys and Future Hopes." JUMP CUT, No. 30, March, 1985.

Koch, Gertrud. "Von der Weiblichen Sinnlichkeit und ihrer Lust und Unlust am Kino. Mutmassungen über vergangene Freuden und neue Hoffnungen." Ed. Gabriele Dietze, *Die Überwindung der Sprachlosigkeit*. Neuwied: Luchterhand Verlag, 1979.

Koch, Gertrud. "Why Women Go to the Movies." JUMP CUT, No. 27, July, 1982.

Kockner, Beate. "Horst du mein heimliches Rufen? Die 'gute' und die 'böse' Lust." *Strandgut*, No. 26, Mar. 1980, Frankfurt am Main.

Kracauer, Siegfried. *Theory of Film*. London/New York: Oxford University Press,

1960.

Kunert, Gunter. *Ortsangaben*. Berlin/GDR: 1970.

Marcus, Steven. *The Other Victorians. A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England*. London: Corgi Books, 1964.

Moreck, Curt. *Sittengeschichte des Kinos*. Dresden: 1956.

Negt, Oskar and Kluge, Alexander. *Offentlichkeit und Erfahrung. Zur Organisationsanalyse von burgerlicher und proletarischer Offentlichkeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Philosophical Library, p. 578.

Serner, Walter. "Kino und Schaulust." *Die Schaubuhne* 9, 1913. Quoted in *Kino-Debatte*, ed. by Anton Kaes. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1978.

Weiss, Peter. *Der Schatten des Körpers des Kutschers*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1964.

[To top](#) [To page 1 of essay](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)

Ganja and Hess Vampires, sex, and addictions

by Manthia Diawara and Phyllis Klotman

from *Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, pp. 30-36

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1990, 2006

GANJA AND HESS (1973) was suppressed in the United States because it did not turn out to be the Hollywood genre film which its producers, Kelly and Jordan, had commissioned the writer and film director Bill Gunn to make. They produced GANJA AND HESS at a time when blaxploitation movies like SHAFT, with supercops who were black repetitions of James Bond and Charles Bronson, played as blockbusters in black neighborhoods. The producers wanted a film that would exploit black audiences — a black version of white vampire films.

However, the producers withdrew the film when Gunn went beyond the vampire genre to create an original product. That the producers literally dismembered the original GANJA AND HESS is a tragedy. Fortunately, at least one good print of the work survived so that the original is back in circulation today.[1][[open notes in new window](#)]

In fact, the original version received many favorable reviews. It received the critics' choice prize at the Cannes Festival, and James Murray of the Amsterdam News hailed it as "the most important Black produced film since SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAADASSSS SONG." [2] James Monaco, too, describes the film as the great underground classic of Black film, and, I think, the most complicated, intriguing, subtle, sophisticated, and passionate Black film of the seventies. If SWEET SWEETBACK is *Native Son*, GANJA AND HESS is *Invisible Man* (Monaco, 205).

GANJA AND HESS violates conventional narrative devices such as beginning, middle, and end, a clearly defined hero and heroine, and cause and effect. Therefore, it is difficult to summarize. On the surface, the film deals with Dr. Hess Green and his relationship with his assistant George Meda, a chauffeur who's also a part-time minister, and Meda's wife Ganja, who becomes Hess Green's wife after her husband's death.

Early in the film we know that Green works as an anthropologist and archivist in a museum. He does research on an ancient African tribe which had been destroyed by a blood disease ten thousand years before Egypt. We also know that Green is an elegant and sophisticated man by his clothes, Rolls Royce, and magnificent mansion, where a servant meets his every need. The film accentuates Hess Green's

aristocratic aspect — he's shown as an ex-married man who likes to entertain on his large estate; he slips easily into foreign languages and decorates his mansion with art from Africa, Asia, and Europe. He sends his son to boarding school.

As we learn these things about him, we also see Green's daily activities at work and around town, and we meet the other main characters of the story. We see Green's chauffeur as the minister of a small church. The chauffeur/minister tells us about other important aspects of Green's life, including the fact that his employer is addicted to blood. In daylight Green robs blood banks or kills people, sucking their blood to satisfy his vampiric needs. He contracted this (lust for blood) disease, which also makes him immortal, from an artifact he collected in Africa. At the same time that we meet the chauffeur/minister, we also meet Meda who has arrived to become Green's new assistant at work.

Green invites Meda to stay at his mansion until the assistant finds his own place. George Meda is a frustrated artist who has attempted suicide several times. At the mansion, Meda finally succeeds in killing himself. Green sucks his assistant's blood and preserves the body in the freezer for his future needs. Some time later, Ganja comes to town looking for Meda and soon finds her husband in the freezer. Wasting no time in mourning, she becomes Hess Green's bride and, like him, a vampire. Toward the film's end, Green, tiring of his vampire lifestyle, goes to the chauffeur/minister's church to redeem himself. He dies, but Ganja lives on, continuing the vampire tradition.[3]

GANJA AND HESS is stunning and complex. The camera lingers on Green's art collection in a magnificent country estate nestled in the all-white landscape of Westchester county in New York. In addition to his preacher/ chauffeur, Green is tended by a retainer Archie, who serves as butler, valet, and all-purpose servant, with genteel manners and closed mouth. In visual style, the mansion has all the trappings of the most successful haute bourgeoisie, yet it also seems in a state of sumptuous decay. The film indicts Hess Green's very wealth and class position as *vampirism*.

When George Media comes into this environment, he is an artist and self-proclaimed psychotic who gets drunk and philosophizes about death while sitting in the branch of a tree, his legs dangling in close proximity to a noose. The first person whose blood we see Green drink is George's. The film thus pits the pleasure-loving materialist and the artist against each other in a struggle which the artist appears to lose.

When George's beautiful wife Ganja arrives from Europe, she and Hess begin a torrid, sensuously depicted sexual relationship that culminates in their marriage, even after Ganja discovers George's body in the freezer. As Hess initiates her into his life-without-death, he even provides an evening of pleasure, including a handsome young man whom they subsequently kill. After feeding from his blood, they dispose of his body, although Ganja insists the victim is still breathing.

Though Ganja doesn't, Hess repents. He does not become satisfied now that he has a partner in addiction; he desperately wants to be free. Hess goes to the black church where his chauffeur preaches, and he stands in the shadow of the cross, knowing he will finally be able to die. Although he tries to get Ganja to go with him, she refuses. After Hess' body is carried away, she waits inside the sumptuous

mansion, now hers, for the young man who rises out of the pool, out of death, to join her.

STARKLY CONTRASTING IMAGES

From this skeletal outline of what seems to be a variant of the Dracula tale, one hardly begins to understand the powerful images that Bill Gunn has assembled. The film opens with medium and close-up shots of western art — sculpted alabaster figures, inordinately white, as though the camera has chosen to shoot them in the brightest possible light. Throughout the film, the framing juxtaposes western *objets d'art* against various pieces of African art from the museum and from Hess Green's palatial home. In fact, the film manipulates many kinds of "doubles" — scenes that deliberately match other scenes; objects and gestures that either repeat or contrast with elements of each other, depicted in linear or circular relations.

Characterization, in particular, abounds in these contrasts and contradictions. For example, a white administrator holds out his hand in the western gesture of politesse, and an African woman's hand gesture indicates only ambiguous welcome. Hess Green is drawn into the relation with George Meda through the white administrator. Hess Green's death comes through a primitive African implement that infects him with his blood addiction. He lives a life completely separate from other black people, yet he represents a success in white bourgeois materialist terms, with an estate, cars, servants and clothes. His taste is impeccable. His son, one step further removed from black people, has received the best private school education and the boy speaks French as easily as English. In stark contrast to Hess Green is his chauffeur, the preacher whose church we see immediately after we see the very white and cold western art.

The church and the gospel music exude a warm personal and worshipful attitude. The cross figures here in its usual environment, but the compositions use it symbolically in other settings — around the minister's neck on a chain; behind Meda as he commits "suicide"; in the scene with Ganja when Hess Green has determined to die. Because *GANJA AND HESS* is so rich in visual and narrative texture, we can analyze it in a number of different ways. To analyze the narrative, however, is particularly rewarding. In this film, as James Monaco has noted, director Bill Gunn provides us with "an impressive arsenal of narrative techniques — straight documentary, high melodrama, dark ritual, and cool realism — each of which he handles with simple assurance" (p. 206).

Thinking of narration as an active process by which a character produces a space allows us to analyze and understand the relation between the storyline and the trajectory of the images. The script will place other characters and/or objects in the storyline's space. In a fictional film both the narrative and the events that make up the narrative depend on the process of spatial narration. *Narration* must therefore be considered a broad concept which goes beyond the positioning of the camera to include the character's/ narrator's world view and judgment. We learn and the narration shows us how the characters deduce meaning. Thus, as soon as a character/narrator creates a filmic space, he/she is simultaneously placing the viewer in relation or reaction to that space. What makes *GANJA AND HESS* such a rewarding and complex experience for viewers is that we must see and interpret the film through the eyes of *different* characters and implied narrators. Through

the film they all compete for the final narrative authority.

FIRST TEN SEQUENCES

To illustrate our point let's look at the first few opening sequences of GANJA AND HESS. The sequences are numbered in the order in which they appear:

- (1) A written statement about Hess Green explains in an authoritative way his profession, his habits, and the reasons for his immortality. Biblical references are drawn to support these claims.
- (2) Fade to a display of Greek Statues. The camera pans left and more statues are revealed. As the camera pans or fades to more statues (old and new), a religious song on the soundtrack tells the history of the world from a Christian perspective.
- (3) Cut to a church scene with the religious song still on the soundtrack. As we hear this song in the foreground, another song is heard in the background, sung by the minister and his congregation. The first song stops and is replaced by the words of the minister who introduces himself as a part time chauffeur for Hess Green.
- (4) An outdoor scene showing the minister/chauffeur driving Green around town. We hear the words which started in the church in the audio foreground. In the background the audio picks up natural street noises, such as cars and sirens. As the car pulls up at the scene of an accident, we see a bleeding man on the ground and learn from the soundtrack that Green is addicted to blood. We also hear that he is not a criminal but a victim. The car stops in front of a house, and the chauffeur opens the door for him to exit.
- (5) The story about Hess Green told on the soundtrack stops for a while. In long shot, George Meda (played by director Bill Gunn) in a three-piece suit looks at his reflection in the mirror. Cut to an extreme long shot of the outside seen through a glass window. The minister/chauffeur opens the car door and Green exits. The camera cuts back to a medium close up of Meda taking aim with a gun. We don't see what he is aiming at.
- (6) Cut to a long shot of the interior of the museum where Green works. A white man dressed in executive dark blue comes to meet him and takes him along the hallway. The white man's voice introduces Meda to Green. We do not see the meeting. Instead we see paintings and statues in the museum. A last shot zooms to an extreme close up of the statues. The story about Green on the soundtrack resumes with quotes from the Bible.
- (7) Story on soundtrack stops again. Fade to a close up of Meda's face, matching his right eye with the eye of the statue previously seen — another "double." Meda is smoking a cigarette and looking scornful.
- (8) An extreme long shot of the three men (Meda, Green, and the white man) walking out of the museum. As the three men talk in the background, we hear Meda express his gratitude to Green in the audio foreground.
- (9) The music which started at the beginning of the film comes back up as the chauffeur drives Green and Meda home. The camera travels with them giving the impression that a great deal of space has been covered. The viewer feels s/he has

embarked on a journey beyond land and sea. The song in the foreground makes references to a pre-Christian era, to slavery and to Christendom. They arrive at Green's house. Song stops.

(10) In the interior of Hess Green's living room, primitive paintings and African masks are revealed. He is sitting with Meda. The retainer Archie brings them food. Meda thanks his host profusely and begins to tell him an anecdote. Green does not laugh at the joke.

An understanding of how these scenes relate to each other and to the rest of the film is crucial to the understanding of GANJA AND HESS. The challenge Bill Gunn poses to the viewer is to infer which character has the narrative authority in each scene. Identifying the main narrators can thus help the audience grasp the ideological and aesthetic assumptions that underlie the film. As the mapping of the scenes shows, our potential narrators here are the minister and Meda. Later on in the film Ganja, too, will emerge as an important narrator. Our task is to analyze the kind of narration established by each character and to show whether or not the "meaning" each establishes is complementary, or whether these "meanings" contradict or challenge each other.

THE MINISTER'S POINT OF VIEW

Let's begin with the minister's narrative since it is the most conspicuous on the soundtrack of the film. As demonstrated in our mapping of these first sequences, the minister assumes the role of a first-person narrator in the film. From the time he introduces himself in the church to the time when he says that he is a part-time chauffeur for Hess Green when he tells Green's story, the film's sound-track seems to be cast in a documentary style in which a voice-over narration comments on the images that are shown. In this sense we can say that the first sequence which consists of a written statement about Hess Green, and the second sequence of statues shown under a religious song, also become part of the minister's narration. Because of their religious content, these two sequences serve as an introduction to the minister's point of view.

At this point let us look more closely at the minister's narrative to see its structural elements, for his sermon has an ideological substructure. We can detect three temporal epochs in what he says: a distant past, an immediate past not very remote from the present, and the present. The distant past refers to the pre-Christian era of a blood-drinking African tribe as depicted also by the statues and the religious song that follows. Then we move to an exhibit of Greek statues and to the coming of Christ. The filmic narrative space visually depicts passage of time from a pre-Christian era of Africans and Greeks to the coming of Christ in two ways.

One way is through continuity editing. Gunn presents the minister's narrative in a straightforward documentary style with events arranged in a linear manner. The sequences succeed each other, maintaining continuity and making a statement about the African tribe. When the camera fades from the last sequence to the Greek statues, the way the camera pans from left to right or fades from one statue to another maintains continuity. A religious song on the soundtrack accompanies the sequence of the statues, part of the sequence in the church, and the sequence in the car going to the estate; this song tells us about the history of the world before and after Christ, and it establishes linear continuity on the audio track.

The immediate past which the minister tells us about is Green's story going from his alienation from God, his passing under the Cross, and his death. Here the minister gives us an authoritative account of how he knew Green. He worked as his part time chauffeur. In this account, we get a documented description of the man's life moving from stage to stage.

In the present tense, the minister tells us his employer is an anthropologist who has developed an affinity for a primitive African tribe of the pre-Christian era. After being stabbed with an artifact from that primitive tribe, Green becomes addicted to human blood just like the Africans he was studying. This then becomes the source of his alienation from God. At first he struggles against his addiction; later he lets himself go, making the gap between himself and God wider and wider. Toward the end, unhappy and unfulfilled, he abandons his instinct of vampirism and joins the church.

The minister uses the present tense as a way of giving a speech to his church. The way he speaks in the present establishes the temporal preaching relation between him and his congregation. We see him praising the Lord after Green's death when his congregation is also shown singing with him. Clearly, the minister is asking his audience in the story and in the theater to follow the example of the repentant Green and to become the lamb of Christ the shepherd.

Consider the ideological assumptions already apparent in the minister's narrative. His words are molded in a Christian worldview and have a didactic message: Find God by the way of the straight path and "live happily ever after." The minister makes this worldview an imperative when he speaks according to the Christian teleological notion of history. That is why the verbal audio organization of these sequences reinforces the linear conception of time. We go from a pre-Christian era to a Christian era, presumably in order to achieve true happiness. In this sense, such a narration places the African tribe as the remotest in history and the least aware of God. In their "godless" world the Africans in the film seemingly live only like vampires. As the song on the soundtrack states, they are unaware that "the blood of the thing is the true blood" and that only Christ's blood guarantees everlasting life. Consequently they are cursed for drinking each other's blood.

From the minister's point of view, Green's problem seemingly derives from failing to accept Christian teleology. Born in a Christian era, Green goes against time back to a primitive African era. He surrounds himself with African icons and artifacts, and like the Africans referred to in the film, he drinks human blood to live. Rather than acknowledge the abundant life that Christ promises to those who come to Him and drink His "blood," Green chooses human blood. The film shows Green's anti-Christian attitudes in many ways, especially with the match cuts of the minister's point of view contrasted with African masks and statues. Green is often composed in the same frame as African artifacts and paintings of devils. Finally, Green attempts to build an earthly "white" paradise and to live forever with servants around him to fulfill his every wish. Such an eternal "richness" on earth stands opposed to the Christian notion of eternity and is therefore a sin against God.

Unlike Green, who tries to revalorize the Africa which ignored Christ, the minister exhorts his parishioners to turn back on Africa's dark moment and to trace history

from the time Christ arrived. It is in this sense that we see Christ as the hero of the minister's narrative, and the Africans — and Green, when he was following their example — as the villains.

Clearly the minister's narrative is very important in the film. It uses a didactic documentary style to shed light on Hess Green's character and to make clear his version of the place of the black church in black history. But can we say that the whole film is told from the minister's point of view? Does everything that takes place in the film fit into his narrative or at least complement it? The end of the film, after Hess Green's death and the final church scene, shows Ganja at a window, smiling at a naked man running toward her. How can we reconcile this scene with the minister's narrative?

MEDA'S POINT OF VIEW

Of equal importance are the scenes involving Meda. If the narrator's point of view at the end of the film parallels that of the minister, surely Meda's narrative also contradicts the minister's. Let's analyze Meda's and Ganja's two points of view to see how they stand aesthetically and/or ideologically in relation to the minister's.

First, Meda's narrative: How do we establish Meda as a narrator from the sequences we have outlined? We already know the minister's overall claim to authority in the film. Moreover, the minister has been able to establish himself as an amiable and reliable character; he loves his congregation and is loved by them. He seems a father figure when he refuses to condemn Green, showing compassion for him instead. Finally, the minister assumes a prototypical storyteller's role when he uses voice-over narration in order to explain the images to the viewer. It is therefore against the minister's overall narrational authority that any claim to an alternate narrative voice must be put.

Meda's narrative takes place within an Oedipal scenario that also shapes the film, i.e., an attempt to destroy the father in order to secure an identity. In the film, Meda, played by Bill Gunn himself, is a black artist plagued by the problem of identity. He tells Green in a conversation that he is schizophrenic: Meda feels sometimes like a victim and sometimes like a murderer. Meda is literally the victim in the film; he is attacked by a vampire, Green. Meda, as a black artist in the U.S., is also a victim of the condition of racism: He cannot create, from a sociological standpoint, without accusing white America, but he also cannot create without involving Black America. This becomes clear in the scene where Meda attempts suicide. He tells Green that he has tried not to involve him. The doctor replies that that would be impossible since he is the only "colored" man in the area. Thus, any black action always inevitably involves other blacks. The film emphasizes this when we see Green feed off the blood of black victims. Then the images are almost always close ups. Not so with the white victims — they're distanced from us by the camera and shown in long shot.

Meda, the artist, is also a murderer. His art is the romantic's art of silence and negation. In fact the open letter that he reads to a "black man" attests to this. He tells the black man to stay away from philosophy and any kind of action so as to remain innocent like a flower. Truth and purity for Meda can only be found in death. With death we can conquer time and action, for time is volatile and action is futile. Thus, part of Meda's art, in the tradition of romantic nihilism, are his many

abortive attempts at suicide, as well as his final one, which succeeds.

The visual montage of Meda's death scene allows at least two readings. Perhaps Green, the vampire, kills him. First we see Meda pointing a gun at himself; then we see Green standing up and touching his stomach to imply a hunger for blood; then the gun goes off and we see Meda falling. Perhaps Meda succeeds at suicide. The film implies ambiguity.

Art as death for the black artist is the theme of Meda's narrative. Meda himself examines the whole process of narration. Should the black man follow the linear narrative technique the minister used? For Meda, this would be a repetition of the same, and that "same" has always denied him an authentic voice. On the contrary, Meda believes in interfering with the minister's logic, deconstructing it in order to bring out the truth. Meda's narrative is therefore metafilmic; i.e., it questions the teleology so strongly assumed by the minister.

Indeed, Meda's narrative seems a "narrative film about filmmaking." In sequence ten above, Meda tells Green an anecdote about filmmaking. In it Meda shows how dense in meaning words and images are. The implication of the anecdote, and of GANJA AND HESS as a whole, is that it is erroneous to take anything for granted, even the minister's narrative or the Hollywood continuity editing style.

MEDA CONTRADICTS THE MINISTER

Let us look in detail at how Meda's narration contradicts the minister's. We know that in sequence five, when Meda is introduced for the first time, the minister's voice over does not accompany the shot. We see Meda in a long shot, looking at himself in the mirror self-critically. Immediately following that shot we see an extreme long shot, taken from behind a glass window, of the minister opening the car door, and Hess Green exiting. If we compare this shot with its "double" — the one at the end of sequence four, of the minister opening the car door for Hess Green — this will shed light on Meda's narrational space. The two shots are separated by the long shot of Meda looking at himself in the mirror. However the shot of Meda does not constitute a transition between the two shots. There's no continuity between them. The long shot of Meda seems to stand in the way of the minister's story, block its continuous flow, and begin a new narrative going in the opposite direction.

In fact, the "double" shots of the minister opening the car door are taken from two different points of view. Clearly the first shot, the one at the end of sequence four, represents the minister's point of view, for it logically follows the shots of the minister's driving Hess Green around town. The composition shows the minister with his back to us when he opens the car door, and Green facing us while getting out of the car. The angle thus provides a conventional over-the-shoulder shot from the minister's point of view. Furthermore, the shot is placed within the sequence according to all the rules of Hollywood continuity editing, and it depicts both a probable time and space.

The second shot, the "double" however, cannot fit into the minister's narrational framework. This extreme long shot taken from behind a glass window seems to represent the point of view of another person inside the house who is watching the minister and Green as they get out of the car. The minister could not occupy this

viewpoint and stand in the street at the same time. Nor does the shot follow any linear flow. Rather, it repeats exactly the same action depicted in a previous shot: i.e. the minister coming out from behind the wheel and opening the car door for Green. Not only does such a repetition disrupt continuity editing, it establishes that the narrational space has shifted from the minister's point of view to Meda's point of view.

The film establishes Meda as the implied narrator of this shot and subsequent ones in many ways. First, the shot described above comes between two shots of Meda: one long shot of him looking at himself in the mirror, and another, a close up of him taking aim with a gun. This unusual editing style in fact has a pattern. The first shot shows Meda as a subject looking and/or thinking; the second shot of the minister opening the car door depicts what Meda sees; the third shot of Meda is a reaction shot. Although Meda is standing in the bathroom — an unlikely position to see the scene in the street — we can call shot two his point of view simply because he is recreating it. It's an action that has already taken place by the time we see Meda. We first see him critically examining his other self in the mirror, we may assume from shot two that he is examining a past action in his mind. And in any case, it is significant to the film that Meda's narrative is not linear.

Another way the film establishes Meda as the narrational determinant of this and other shots in the sequence is through graphically matching his eye in scene seven with the eye of a statue at the end of scene six. At the end of scene six, we see Green walking in the museum hall with a white man, whom we hear introducing Meda to Green. The camera, after following the two men, focuses on a classical statue and zooms in to a close up of the statue's right eye. At that time, the eye takes on a lifelike quality. Through a fade, this shot matches a close up of Meda's right eye before the camera zooms out to reveal the rest of his face, as he puffs on a cigarette. We see a look of scorn implying he remembers seeing the white man introduce him to Green, but perhaps from another (the statue's) dissociated viewpoint.

The look of scorn on Meda's face here also reveals his attitude toward the minister's story. Looking at scene six in the museum, we know that its narrational spaces seem shaped by the minister's point of view. After all, the minister's voice over accompanies the shots. But when we begin to see the shots in scene six from Meda's point of view, we realize how much the minister's linear narrative leaves out, how much is literally unseen.

The minister's narrational space simplifies and reduces everything to a Christian worldview. For example, this scene, from Meda's point of view, contains images of his first day at work, the way the white man introduces him to Green, and the art works displayed in the museum. For the minister, that moment is only about Green and Green's estrangement from God's truth: i.e. "He who shall drink my blood and eat my flesh shall live forever." Clearly Meda resents the minister's straight-forward but severely limited narrative. For Meda it does not leave room for ambiguity; the minister's story sacrifices everything for the sake of the denouement.

The film also depicts Meda's reaction against a linear narrative (i.e. that of the Christian) by the way Meda takes aim with a gun in scene five. Although we don't see what he's aiming at, the editing leaves no doubt as to his intentions. He wants to kill something, silence it forever. The probable targets are these: his other self

which he sees in the mirror, the minister and Green as they come out of the car, or Green and the white man as he sees them in the museum. It is in this sense that we refer to Meda's narrative act or narrative space as establishing an art of death. He has to go back and forth in circles killing everything that has repressed and suppressed his identity.

On an idea level, the concepts of blacks are damaged both by the minister's teleological conception of history and the white man's philosophy. He, Meda, must also kill his other self, the one in the mirror, because it is false and inauthentic. Clearly, therefore, death represents a positive element in Meda's art. The black artist, by killing the father (here the minister), does devalorize tradition (here the linear narrative). By killing himself, at last the black artist enables a new person to be born in the viewer. In this sense, the black artist, like Christ, rewrites history by assigning it new directions. Thus the film compares him to Christ through recurrent match editing or matching shots. The visual symbolism is especially clear in the death scene where the crucifix is prominent behind him as he falls to the floor.

GANJA'S NARRATIVE

Let's now turn to Ganja's narrative and see how it unfolds. The minister's narrative has reached its climax in Hess Green's suffering, despite material wealth and sensual pleasures. It ends with Hess Green's repentance and death and the song in the church praising the Lord. The scene with Ganja smiling at the window and a naked man running toward her follows the church scene, but that scene is set up from a point of view different from that of the minister's. In the remaining pages of this essay we will argue that the narrative point of view here, the narrational and cinematic space, is Ganja's. She, too, defies the minister.

Ganja is introduced in the film in *medias res*. She arrives on the scene after George Meda's death. However, her narrative does not begin with her introduction into the film. Her first appearances can fit into the minister's linear narrative. In this sense we can say that she seems to appear as a wife who has come looking for her husband, Meda. When she finds out about Meda's death, she begins seeing Hess Green and later marries him. Significantly Ganja and Hess are married by the minister/chauffeur, who sees both of them as sinners in need of God's mercy. The fact that Ganja is not a narrator — that her story is told and that she does not determine any narrational space — can be seen from the way she's characterized when first introduced in the film.

We see Ganja as a rude and uncouth woman who has no respect for Dr. Hess Green or his employees. She's overbearing and even insulting to Hess' retainer and seems in no hurry to find her husband. When asked by Hess to state her real motive for coming to his estate, she replies, "money." She soon goes to bed with him. Both on a verbal and visual level, the film never presents her subjectivity at this point, but rather it exploits a negative depiction of Ganja so as to present her from the minister's Christian moral point of view.

However, as soon as Ganja finds Meda's body, our perception of her changes. Gradually we begin to see her through more appreciative eyes. Specifically, this change in point of view takes place in Hess' dining room. Ganja and Hess are sitting at opposite ends of a long table. There is silence in the room. Hess is eating

and Ganja is looking at him. The camera cuts to a classical painting on the wall, then to a primitive painting, and to a Satanic-like character (a man with horns and a tail). Then we see a shot of Ganja still staring at Hess. By association we can say that Ganja has changed from looking like the classical "good" painting via "primitivism" to looking like the "devil." Judging her through the minister's eyes, we might see this as a transformation she would have to go through before marrying a man like Hess.

However, when Ganja moves from the end of the table to a position on the left, near Hess, things begin to change. We are now seeing a new Ganja. She is defying both Meda and the minister and tracing the trajectory of her own narration. As Ganja puts aside the impact of Meda's death, the film allows her narrative to plead for our sympathy. She tells Hess her life story and talks about the unfair treatment she received from her mother. Unloved all her life, she decided to love and protect herself. While Meda's anecdote had had no impact on Hess, Ganja's story moves him greatly. He falls in love with her and they marry. Visually, the style changes from deep-focus long shots when Ganja is sitting at the end of the table, to medium close ups which imply more warmth and love.

Ganja challenges both Meda and the minister's narrational styles and takes over their narrational space. The film effects this in many ways. We have already pointed out that Meda's narrative consisted of killing himself, Green, and the minister. As a black artist, his hope is that a new and better generation will take their place. Ganja comes and, in defiance of this world view, revalorizes Hess Green's life style and adopts it. In this sense she devalorizes Meda's narrative. She rejects his romantic nihilism. We can even say that she kills him and takes his place, in the sense that he was Hess' assistant, and now she is Hess' wife.

Ganja also defies the minister's morality and linear sense of causality, and she takes over his "space" in the filmic narration. This is made clear soon after her marriage to Hess. We see a shot of her standing on the terrace looking down on the minister getting out of the car. This, in fact, "triples" Meda's perception, as described earlier. The low angle which depicts Ganja by shooting up at her shows a look of scorn on her face and implies her superiority, or at least her challenge to the minister/chauffeur's authority. Ganja's narrative also stands the minister's narrative on its head. She approves everything the minister condemns. She has learned to like blood because, like a hallucinatory drug, it helps her escape into a land of pleasure. Although she did not willingly become a vampire — Green had appropriated her to escape his own loneliness (he "kills" her in a simulated African ritual) — she takes control of the situation once she realizes what has happened. She enjoys the earthly paradise Hess built because it is immediate and real.

Ganja is a contemporary black woman. She is tired of being subservient to the church and to black men. She's glad that Meda and Hess, the self-destructive artist and the bourgeois patriarch, are gone. It is in this sense that we understand her cunning smile at the end. She's in command. The last image of her potential sexual pleasure and control comes as a surprise, because the two major narrative threads had been woven from a male perspective.

After all, Gunn entitled his film GANJA AND HESS![4]

NOTES

1. According to James Monaco, GANJA AND HESS was reedited, redubbed, and renamed BLOOD COUPLES. Another alternative title was DOUBLE POSSESSION. This version bears no resemblance to the original. See Monaco, *American Film Now* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p 207.

[Editors' note: GANJA AND HESS was housed at the Museum of Modern Art for more than seven years after the film was pulled from circulation and reedited as THE BLOOD COUPLE. It was one of the most demanded films at the Museum of Modern Art, which held the print as a courtesy to Bill Gunn. Gunn gave permission for each request to screen that one remaining print. In 1980, GANJA AND HESS was screened in Paris at the Independent Black American Film Festival, where Gunn was one of ten independent U.S. black filmmakers invited to present his work. That program of forty films then toured New York State later that year.

Pearl Bowser met with John Gottenberg to discuss the proposed withdrawal of the print from circulation there so as to protect the only existing print until funds could be found to make a 16mm internegative. Bowser volunteered to raise the money to insure the continued availability of the film for exhibition and to preserve the work of an important African American director. Bowser worked with Gunn to setup a series of advance bookings and personal appearances for Gunn from Washington to Florida. Since GANJA AND HESS had become a cult film, money was raised to pay the lab fees and small honoraria for Gunn. In this way, community groups, libraries, museums, media centers, and colleges around the country provided the \$10,000 needed to preserve GANJA AND HESS. The film is distributed now in both 16mm and videocassette formats by African Diaspora Images, PO Box 3517, Brooklyn NY 11202 (718/852-8353). It is also distributed by Third World Newsreel, 335 W 38th St., NYC 10018; 212/947-9277.

[Editor's Note: 2006, A restored version is available used on DVD or video but is not currently in distribution.]

2. James Murray, "Reel Images, the Film Scene" in the *Amsterdam News*, date unknown.

3. Ganja is not unlike Billie Holiday. She is a woman who defines her values in the skepticism of the Blues tradition. It is in this sense that Ganja is a modernist. It is also interesting here to compare Ganja to Shug and Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Like Blues singers such as Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday, they are modern women who are not restrained by race and value-based constraints.

4. This essay was originally written in 1983.

El Brigadista

Style and politics in a Cuban film

by John Ramirez

from *Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, pp. 37-49

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1990, 2006

In the following analysis of the 1977 Cuban film *EL BRIGADISTA* (dir. Octavio Cortazar), I will attempt to delineate the threads of a complex, at times seemingly irregular, and highly problematic text. As a Cuban film, *EL BRIGADISTA* must be considered in terms of that country's cultural context. Cultural production in Cuba strives to tie the artistic to the daily realm of social experience. Cuban cinema's textual dynamics find explicit grounding in popular history and national identity.

Such film practice derives from an unique context. In Cuba, cinema has an institutional validation, its artifice legitimated, and its directors moved to create "effective" works because film has such an enthusiastic following of viewers/consumers. The Cuban national film industry artistically confronts the historical effects of U.S. domination and aggression. Thus its film practice has consistently offered audiences the means to appraise critically Hollywood fictional film.

To summarize briefly, in Cuba the means for receiving film critically have been disseminated through the following production and distribution practices:

1. There is a policy of teaching media literacy. It is seen as a necessary component of the national program for maintaining a high standard in literacy skills.[\[1\]\[open notes in new window\]](#)
2. Television programming teaching how to read and analyze film accompanies showings of commercial U.S. fictional films, and such TV programs also complement local fare. These programs propose revolutionary parameters which challenge "capitalist" visual and narrative modes.
3. A concerted national policy of film distribution makes full use of all existing exhibition modes (movie houses and television). Cuba also utilizes a system of "mobile film units," which regularly provide films to remote regions where television reception and conventional filmhouse circuits do not extend.
4. Documentary productions have constituted roughly 90% of the Cuban Film Institute's (ICAIC) output since 1959. In fact, ICAIC's formal film training requires that directors produce documentaries exclusively until they master that mode. Only then can they be eligible to make fiction features. Consequently, only a handful of Cuban cineastes have become feature fiction

directors, and the Cuban fictional film consistently incorporates documentary footage and/or effects as a stylistic trademark.

In view of such practices, the linkage between "art" and Cuban daily life probably comes from a two-fold policy. There is a broadly enacted cultural practice of giving people a critical perspective on Hollywood. In effect, this moves the parameters of viewing fictional narrative from entertainment to pedagogy. Of course, either entertainment or pedagogy is ideologically circumscribed. In either case, a certain mode of viewing becomes emphasized by the cultural promotion of a certain kind of consumption or by more general socialization.^[2] Filmmakers themselves reinforce this displacement from *entertainment* to *pedagogy* by incorporating into their fiction films, the realist and informational properties associated with documentary cinema.

Cuban film practice thus promotes to the level of popular knowledge a critical appreciation of the distinction between fictional narrative and documentary. Cuba's own narrative film practices have not tried to simply mix an aesthetic hybrid of documentary and Hollywood narrative codes. Instead, Cuban feature films offer unique textual dynamics. The fictional/documentary division makes sense precisely because the Cuban spectator has an informed capacity to relate fictional postulates to the dictates of day-to-day experience.

In this way, the poles of cultural style emerge not as fiction vs. documentary, but rather as fiction vs. national reality. The spectator engages with the film through a trajectory of identification. Documentary functions as a key mediating factor—documentary stands as an impetus to the viewer's culturally circumscribed "will to knowledge." In this analysis I want to consider the limits of such a linkage between "documentary" and social reality. The object of this project will be to map such textual dynamics in one feature fiction film, *EL BRIGADISTA*. These textual dynamics facilitate culturally circumscribed pathways for Cuban social positioning, specifically in terms of sexuality and gender identification.

In *EL BRIGADISTA*, Mario is a fifteen-year-old, aspiring medical student from Havana who volunteers for service with the Benitez Brigade of the 1961 Cuban Literacy Campaign. Mario is assigned to teach reading and writing to a rural community deep in the Zapata swamplands. In the course of his stay in the community, Mario faces a series of events that alter his character and steer him along a path of fearless revolutionary commitment. The film measures this commitment, as we will discover, by the degree of Mario's masculinization.

In the Cuban ideological context, the Revolution has established the conceptual framework for enacting a cohesive, unified social agenda. In this film that agenda informs the narrative, consequently privileging masculinity as a voice of authority. For example, in the film the fictional terms of masculinity correspond, at an ideological level, with the day-to-day mandate for revolutionary vigilance. In other words, the film endorses a heightening of national self-awareness in terms specific to the rhetoric of machismo.

The film's narrative rests on a coming-of-age formula. Mario enters an unfamiliar social space and thus encounters a crisis of adequate social performance. He faces this tension at the threshold between adolescence and impending adulthood. His social/emotional tension is fueled by the community's male members, who treat

Mario with varying degrees of hostility because of his age and urban background. To the men, both these traits mark Mario's performance as limited. His youth connotes him as presocial (not yet of age or experience), and his urban origin connotes carefree frivolity ("People from Havana are like owls; they stay up all night and sleep all day").

In addition, Havana bears a particular historical significance for having been, prior to the Revolution, a rather notorious center of homosexual activity. That activity for the most part, ran strictly along class lines (e.g., on one hand, adolescent male prostitution accommodated an upper-class tourist sector, and on the other hand, a sector of the local elite was characterized by a flamboyant and self-indulgent lifestyle).^[2] In addition, homosexual activity shared a sexual marketplace with female prostitution and a flourishing pornography trade.

The figurative cinematic tension around Mario's "masculine" traits gradually works itself out in political terms. The community patriarchs' unity is ruptured when one of them, Juan, defects to join a band of counter-revolutionaries, a group of adult males who stand in inverse relation to the community patriarchs. Juan is clearly anti-social. His dialogue suggests a nostalgic desire for a return to prerevolutionary social conditions; his actions suggest a desire for self-indulgence and individual grandeur. In the community, Juan is aggressively disruptive and divisive. Furthermore, upon defecting, he abandons his wife. Then he returns later to coerce her into complicity with his newfound counter-revolutionary male community, who ultimately shoot and kill her.

The space of the counter-revolutionaries visually excludes women; again, it is an inverse structure from that of the community patriarchs. At no point in the film's dynamic are women brought into the signifying system that bridges the text to the spectator's social position. Women do not figure here with any structural authority that would afford such linkage. Rather, the film reinforces the masculine via a textual scaffolding in which the textually expendable counter-revolution, through a system of sexual dynamics, becomes entangled or conflated with the "feminine."

In the way it constitutes the counter-revolutionaries the film offers the judgment of "inversion" — a libidinal association that in the film is visually homo-social and narratively homo-erotic. And because the counter-revolutionary space is textually imbued with a narrative excess of women, it must be eliminated. And Mario must trace a path to, conjunction with, and passage through the counter-revolution so as to become "masculine." This narrative path makes specific his textual significance.

Mario's character stands as the fictional postulate which the Cuban audience is invited to trace back to social reality. Structurally, the film signals such a tracing in part by a bracketing strategy, which opens the narrative as oral history. As the film opens, we see a sequence of wildlife footage accompanied by a male voice-over recalling March 1961, when in accordance with the Literacy Campaign the community was sent a teacher. The film ends with a sequence of black-and-white newsreel footage. Then we see hundreds of volunteer Literacy teachers return to Havana and as they reunite with/reconstitute families, we hear voice-over excerpts from Fidel Castro's welcoming speech and the melody of the Literacy Campaign anthem.

By way of these same codes, the film "maps" Mario's character. His presentation

begins as a mere fictional artifice, mediated with historical/documentary evidence. The character is then linked to daily life. This audience-character linkage corresponds to the terms of the character's coming-of-age. As a privatized, pre-social adolescent, narratively individualized, he suggests a whole host of suspect connotations (often sexual) posed by individual space against a collective order. In the film's narrative resolution, his maturation process is absorbed by the documentary footage that presumes to verify history and collective social space.

A consistent thread in this mapping comes from a dimension to Mario's pre-social adolescence which the film structures in terms of pre-sexuality. As he moves between the rupture between the community patriarchs and their "inverted" opponents, Mario connotatively moves against a specific agenda of libidinal organization — one that is culturally circumscribed both by State and tradition and is recognizable as homosexuality.^[3] The sole option Mario has to such a path is "masculinity." Thus, as Mario passes from individualized to collective space, from pre-social to social validation, from fictional artifice to historical signifier, his passage also represents the character's connotative movement from a narratively calculated ambiguous sexual definition to a definitive gender affiliation and performative sexual order. The film moves Mario's character development toward an essential "masculine" organization of character. Contingent on his becoming clearly "masculine" is the validation of his knowledge and social participation. Indeed, given the character's placement within the documentary configuration of the Literacy Campaign, it seems that, in this film, the weight of historical credibility attributable to that event also rests upon the youth's effective "masculinization."

Mario thus undergoes libidinal alignment, and this process parallels the film's whole narrative organization on a number of levels. First, since the film's story is structurally contained within explicit frames of historical perspective (via mediations of documentary form), the narrative deploys a factor of "memory." Within this "memory" factor we find very limited feminine figures:

- Mario's passivity;
- the matriarch of the surrogate family;
- the young female student with whom he engages romantically;
- his domineering biological mother who tries to dissuade him from his teaching service;
- the defector's wife who attempts to seduce Mario.

I cite these figures in the order that they appear in the film. They exist at the rupture between community patriarchs and counter-revolutionaries. Significant is the fact that Mario figures in both the system of the masculine and in the zone of the feminine. He also stands between the two politically opposed segments of society's fragmented masculinity. This position sets him at a structural parallel with the young female student's mid-placement along the paradigm of feminine figures. The film marks the fact that the two young people each are at a significant threshold in both the men's and the women's communities by narratively establishing their romantic bonding. Add to this narrative design the text's historical circumscription and the narrative's movement whereby the coming-of-age format seems to suggest Freud's notion of pubescent libidinal organization:

"At a time at which the first beginnings of sexual satisfaction are still linked with the taking of nourishment, the sexual instinct has a sexual

object outside the infant's own body in the shape of his mother's breast. It is only later that the instinct loses that object, just at the time, perhaps, when the child is able to form a total idea of the person to whom the organ that is giving him satisfaction belongs. As a rule the sexual instinct then becomes auto-erotic, *and not until the period of latency has been passed through is the original relation restored. There are thus good reasons why a child sucking at his mother's breast has become the prototype of every relation of love. The finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it.*"[4] (emphasis mine)

The brackets bring to the film the energy of memory. That memory's (syntagmatic) historical flow alternately encounters and abandons the (paradigmatic) horizontal circulation of feminine figures. This movement adds to the text's tactic of historical imperative a feminine zone that paradoxically functions as something both constant and temporary. Thus, the film's textual system conflates revolutionary cultural history with with a specific sexual economy. More specifically, the film confuses revolutionary vigilance with machismo culture.

In EL BRIGADISTA, history is determined via the masculine syntagmatic structure. The text makes clear its targets of affirmation (revolutionary patriarchs) and negation (homo-social counter-revolutionaries). However, a less dogmatic, more complex historical impetus is suggested by the film's parallel feminine figures. In one sense, the zone of the feminine suggests inversions of its own (from figures of redeemability to those of irredeemability). However, the scale of these postures is not structured in terms of polarity. One side does not outweigh the other in terms either of presence or value. Rather, these female figures circulate in the film via Mario. The spectator encounters the women in accordance with the need to calculate Mario's masculinization, and that calculation ultimately is gauged by his renunciation of those figures.

The narrative's project is to direct Mario along an impenetrable course of masculinity. Along that course, the possibility that he is homosexual can never be more than an underlying allusion. That possibility exists on a par with the text's other feminine figures, who circulate only as peripheral to Mario's correct development. Considering that Latin American homosexuality shares a particular alignment with social codes of femininity (e.g., often only the penetrated male is considered homosexual) and that in this text the most explicit assignment of homosexuality is to the counter-revolutionaries, there is little wonder that the narrative could not support homosexuality as an explicit option for Mario.

Because of this circumstance, the status of women in the film remains highly problematic. Mario's route is masculinization. Therefore the film adheres to a textual organization which, in effect, erases the feminine from cultural significance — that is, from the very fabric of revolutionary history. In this text the feminine becomes vital to the masculine regime only insofar as it offers an open field for renunciation. In this textual order, the feminine exists only as emblematic of masculine authority. The status of the "feminine" in the film corresponds to Hispanic sexual mythology, which establishes an economy of identification. That mythology depends on a descending scale of value that originates with enunciative investment in the masculine. It is a system according to which "...man is the whole entity, and woman the incomplete one, whom it is man's duty ...to make

complete..."[5]

For the most part, Latin American male homosexuality is bound within the same economy of identification. Outside a feminine posture, virtually no social space exists in which male homosexuality can stake claim to a genuine value and identificatory agenda. If a man performs socially and sexually as "masculine," if his self-representation remains invested in the codes of masculinity, including maintaining heterosexual encounters, then he probably will not be read socially as "homosexual." Even though he may have sex with other males, he is not considered homosexual nor does he necessarily see himself as such if he always assumes the dominant position of penetrator. On the other hand, this cultural context presumes that the homosexual "insists on considering himself a woman." [6]

Thus, the homosexual becomes socially recognized as the man who

"...behave[s] sexually and socially like a woman (hence the Latin American acceptance, and even approval, of the drag queen, and the frequent insistence, on the part of the Latin American macho in his private dealings with homosexuals, that the homosexual partner act like a woman.)" [7]

In this economy of sexual performances, Hispanic male homosexuality tends to be aligned with the feminine. Such an alignment prevails in contemporary Cuba. Of the hundreds of male homosexuals who took part in the 1980 Mariel exodus, the overwhelming majority who had been targeted during their lives for rehabilitation or criminal prosecution were those demonstrating a range of effeminate postures: from gestures and mannerisms to transvestism in the social sphere, and the recipient position in the sexual sphere. Furthermore, to gain virtual guarantee of being allowed to leave the country at that time, a number of otherwise "unquestionable" males merely donned feminine attire and/or affects.

EL BRIGADISTA tries to orchestrate its terms of difference along lines of ideological affiliation (e.g., revolutionary/ counter-revolutionary) and development (e.g., political immaturity/ maturation). In fact, the film bases these references upon a series of presuppositions about the "natural" hierarchy of gender positions and corresponding order of heterosexual relations. The text reveals this kind of reliance as it develops the coming-of-age motif through a metaphoric system which suggests a biological sequence of conception, gestation, and birth. The text promotes an agenda of masculinity which must pass from a fictive to an extra-textual significance. At the same time, this metaphoric development makes the text itself "give birth to" a most valued cultural product — masculinity via Mario's development.

The text does not valorize or give significance to the "feminine." Rather, it only supports the "maternal," which functions as its index of feminine value. The total realm of the feminine itself is confined to designations of mother, virgin, whore, and homosexual (all four of these appellations significantly figure to signal and signify masculine sexual performance). The text's maternal design is intended to carry textual movement from artifice to social signifier. However, only a masculine significance will be "born," i.e., find its way to the extra-textuality of socially validated meaning and the film's attendant historical agenda (i.e., the Revolution, the Literacy Campaign, the institution of national revolutionary defense).

Bound firmly as metaphor within the narrative's workings, the "maternal" thus circulates as an expendable excess. Its use-value depends on its self-negating duty to deliver up masculine significance. Culturally, masculinity has an already presupposed priority. The film reinforces that cultural disposition, giving masculinity an unquestionable primacy in the spectator's social perception. In this sense, the feminine is confined to a maternalized textual function and so seems to parallel the circumstances of Hispanic femininity. The mother stands as the spectacle of edification. She must deliver socially valued meaning as the condition of her being. Furthermore, her social production has value only insofar as it perpetuates patriarchal privilege.

The opening sequence of "nature" footage, that is, shots of the swamp and of wildlife, unfolds as if the camera were penetrating a space unadulterated by trappings of civilization. The images of this "virgin" territory are accompanied by a male voice-over recalling March 1961, when the swampland community of Maniadero was sent a literacy teacher. After this voice-over recollection comes an image of a distant clearing with a cluster of buildings from which distant off-screen male voices emerge.

As discussed above, the male voice-over establishes as well as partakes of a bracketing system that assumes the unquestionable stance of concrete evidence — that is, to date, to mention the Literacy Campaign mediates the text's fiction and links it with the spectator's day-to-day perceptions and national experience. This first bracket "authorizes" the fiction and joins its all-important constituent of historical discourse to the narrative space of "nature." Consistently thereafter, both history and nature are posed as pre-givens whose dynamics escape the jurisdiction of cultural inquiry.

The epicenter of the "natural" zone is embodied in the image of a sacred tree believed to be occupied by the "guiji," a little black man of power and knowledge to whom the townspeople make ritual offerings of cornmeal to gain his protection. Though the "guiji" remains on an immaterial level of legend and superstition, its protective aspect follows the figure of Mario. The tree sustains a measure of its original meaning because it is connected with Mario through the three interweaving narrative currents: coming-of-age, defeat of the counter-revolutionaries, and success of the Literacy Campaign — the three key factors tied to Mario's masculine development. As the narrative transfers value from the "guiji" to Mario, so it empties the zone of "nature" of a masculine essence, thus setting the stage on which "nature" can be elevated to the purely metaphoric convention of "maternal life-source," and the film develops that reference solely via Mario's masculinization.

The sacred tree's introduction comes with Mario's introduction. The counter-revolutionaries later hang two revolutionary comrades from the tree's limbs. Soon after, Mario discovers evidence at its foot which will solve the murder of the comrades. Finally, Mario hoists atop the tree a Literacy Campaign flag. In significant contrast to the sacred tree as a locale of narrative importance, the men of the community engage daily in a lumber field. There they make their most valued economic contribution to the community's welfare.

The film's closing bracketing system complements this configuration of "nature."

Here the epicentral image shows Fidel Castro in the closing newsreel (plate 23). In that celebratory image, the narrative's three major currents merge and culminate. In this sense, the relation between the narrative zone of "nature" and the circumscribing historical discourse figuratively becomes an intercourse between the maternalized zone of production and the law of an extra-textual authority. This bracketing system corresponds to previously mapped gender positions and sexual affiliations. The historical-discursive brackets hold back the amorphous circulation of the narrative's "natural" zone. "Nature," embodied in the sacred tree, is mystified. The film justifies nature only insofar as the narrative defers significance away from nature's "mystery" on to the assumptions surrounding history, embodied in Castro's image.^[8] Furthermore, the tree functions as a non-specific, natural feature, exchangeable with other trees, while Castro functions as a specific figure, an actor in history.

This structural contour reinforces gender dynamics and buttresses their presumed infallibility by binding them to this textual blueprint. In the text, the imperative of a culturally specific Oedipal agenda operates. Here, historical discourse signifies the Law of the Father. It gives the fiction a mission: to deliver the seed of the masculine thematic to fruition. Such fruition can be gauged by how much the film, in fact, links its "masculinity/ revolutionary" thematic to the audience's extra-textual day-to-day experience.

After the opening sequence of "nature" footage and male voice-over, we see the community patriarchs gather in anticipation of the teacher's arrival. One of these men, Gonzalo, takes leave of the group. He enters a dwelling where Marianna, his wife, busily prepares a meal. Then we see Gonzalo quickly exit to rejoin his compañeros who will pick up the teacher at a nearby Literacy Volunteer encampment. The shot stays with Marianna who sets a dish in the window to cool. From outside the window hands appear, stealing food from the dish. Marianna shouts out that the teacher will be there soon to set the thieves straight. We then see a teenage boy and girl outside, running side-by-side from the window. The boy speculates that the teacher will be bald, fat, and ugly. The girl counters with the suggestion that the teacher might be handsome.

We then see the Literacy encampment where a number of community patriarchs are assigned Mario, a fifteen-year-old volunteer from Havana. Gonzalo immediately takes issue and refuses to accept the boy ("We came here for a real teacher, an educated man!"). As the patriarchs return, curious and well-wishing community inhabitants greet their pick-up truck, but the teacher is nowhere in sight. Gonzalo gets out of the truck in a huff and stomps away. The teenage boy seen earlier peers into the truckbed and calls out to the community members, who begin to gather around. Seen in medium shot, community members directly face the camera laughing and making jest. We then see a reverse medium shot of Mario asleep inside the truckbed in a fetal position. Over a zoom-in on Mario's sleeping image, the film's credits role.

Here begins the "birthing" metaphor. The opening bracket's male voice-over passes to the community patriarchs. We do not know if the introductory male voice belongs to that group. It may have come from Gonzalo, the member whose attitude toward Mario speaks for the male community as a whole. In fact, Gonzalo figures as the narrative's key father-figure. As head of the surrogate family where Mario

will live, Gonzalo becomes a pivotal guiding authority for Mario's development. Beyond that, the film's initial transference of authority to Gonzalo ultimately leads to the closing bracket's authorizing image of Castro.

This sequence also introduces two women characters in their prototypical positive relation to the patriarchal order: i.e., wife/mother (Marianna) and virgin (adolescent girl who will love Mario). Then, through the fetal connotation of Mario's sleeping image, we are introduced to a pattern of direct gazes. Preceding that image we saw one of the community members gazing directly into the camera. That first direct gaze is addressed to the spectator through Mario's image highly encoded as "underdeveloped." Next, the credits emphasize such an underdevelopment, punctuating it and conventionally signaling the spectator to anticipate narrative advancement. Beyond that, this particular shot/reverse shot dynamic conditions viewers to anticipate that subsequent direct gazes will generally focus on and point out the narrative's progress, most specifically the course of Mario's fictional gestation. In the film, such a pattern culminates in the two final direct gazes. When he is finally clearly and irreversibly incorporated into the order of fearless revolutionary commitment, Mario is at the end of his stay. He himself looks at the camera with such a gaze. Mario also elicits a direct gaze from the tearful young woman/virgin onto himself. (She is the only singular female figure to function in the pattern. Her reference to Mario is caught up in a host of sexual dynamics which I will clarify later).

Continued on [page 2](#)

El Brigadista

page 2

from *Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, pp. 37-49

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1990, 2006

In this film, as Shoshana Felman has described the dynamic in literature, identity is

"...conceived as a solely masculine sameness, apprehended as male self-presence and consciousness-to-itself. The possibility of a thought which would neither spring from nor return to this masculine sameness is simply unthinkable." [\[9\]](#)[\[open notes in new window\]](#)

EL BRIGADISTA's coming-of-age format endorses masculinity by resolving the fearfulness of Mario's figure, a fear deriving from character deficiency or immaturity. Such immaturity seemingly is intended to suggest the nation's need to move away from underdevelopment. Yet these very terms depend on an ambiguity in the film's treatment of gender. Mario's placement within "immaturity" compels a textual query as to the adequacy of his manliness, thereby indicating his sexuality is something which the film must resolve. In order to depict Mario's sexual ordering according to the terms of gender division firmly established from the outset, the text must make use of its zone of feminine designations (mother, wife, virgin, whore, homosexual). And in delimiting this feminine zone, the film's narrative resolution, on the level of sexuality, problematically positions women.

As I have pointed out, within the film's systems of opposed ideological polarities, the "feminine" has become implicated in a homosexual association with counter-revolutionaries. Thus, the feminine can never have the same value as the masculine. Along with counter-revolutionary disorder, the film must narratively renounce and structurally sever itself from the feminine. In depicting both the feminine and the counter-revolutionary sectors, the film diverts their respective signifying capacities to the major theme of revolutionary vigilance cum masculinization.

On behalf of the counter-revolutionaries, the defector Juan bears exaggerated insidious connotations associated with the disorder he personifies. He seems to represent an element with infiltrating tendencies, on the model of an infectious disease. The importance attached to "eradication" refers then directly to some healthy, stable, normative order. This order of "health" remains anchored in the narrative by Mario's desire to study and practice medicine. In the text the homosexual implication will be eradicated via the socially therapeutic elimination of the counter-revolutionaries. It is hardly coincidental that the text works out its homosexual component in this way, since the cultural paranoia within Cuba

surrounding this issue repeatedly gets expressed in terms of such an assumption: that homosexuality is a kind of disease, given to dispersing infection.[\[10\]](#)

Within the sphere of the "feminine," the central component of the text's feminine paradigm is to present the virgin as the core value against which figures of mother and whore will be assessed. This paradox of "types" of women typifies its Hispanic cultural context. In the sexual economy of Hispanic machismo, virginity carries the use-value of edification. Virginity allows the culture to place motherhood and prostitution on opposite sides of the same coin, signifying submission to the order of masculine sexuality and proprietary dominance. Within such an order, virginity must be cultivated since it alone can signal the field of unstaked resources open to masculine appropriation.

"Sexually, man is the whole entity, and woman the incomplete one, whom it is man's duty..to make complete. But he makes her whole by possessing, penetrating, breaking her; and she then becomes the despised *la chingada*,...the broken one. He is the breaker, she, the broken and because she has allowed him to break her, to her incompleteness, as against his wholeness, she has added the quality of 'brokenness.'" [\[11\]](#)

Each of the film's female figures has a measurable value only in relation or tie to a man. Thus, that Mario should have a romantic bond with a virgin is by no means coincidental. Mario-plus-virgin is neither an innocent nor a naturally self-evident pairing. Rather, the couple's attachment comes from a structural design where Mario must inevitably encounter the feminine. Such encounters in the film will be qualified precisely by the cultural assumptions informing the social designations of mother, virgin, and whore.

In the film, we have but one representation of the virgin, and the fact that there is just one compels the text to confront the very paradox of Hispanic femininity: How can a woman be at once constant and temporary? How can the film reconcile the virgin woman's prescribed feminine fate, to be possessed, against needing to maintain the virgin's single index of value, namely her availability. Indeed, the film makes the "feminine" credible only to the degree to which the codes of feminine sexuality prop up the textual movement of masculinity (that movement concomitant with the extra-textual linkage of revolutionary identification). And this credibility of the feminine hinges substantially upon the continued status of virginity as its single highest unit of value. Thus, the film confronts the problem of how to submit virginity to the markings of Mario's conquering destiny (masculinity being the sole primary signifier of that destination) without eliminating the signification of the feminine (e.g., virginity) altogether?

For clarification of this issue, we must first consider a scene halfway into the film in which Mario stands in the lumber field with surrogate father/lead patriarch Gonzalo. Here Mario promises to teach Gonzalo to read and write, in return for which Gonzalo will show Mario how to defeat the "sickness" of fear, a task later begun at a wild animal hunt. This scene begins to show the men increasingly impinging on "nature" for the extra-textual delivery of "masculinity." Ultimately, this impinging will target the homosexually suggestive, counter-revolutionary disorder. Counter-revolutionary containment depends on harnessing that space posed as harbinger of the disorder, "nature," (i.e., the untamed, uncharted

swamplands).

As the men organize against the counter-revolutionaries, the connotations attached to the patriarchs' lumberjacking function, in opposition to the sacred tree, gain increasing significance. At the sacred tree the counter-revolutionaries torture and hang two comrades in a scene heavily encoded with homoerotic sadomasochism. Later at the tree Mario gains insight into the facts behind his comrades' untimely deaths (the knowledge that authorizes his direct gaze at the camera). Finally, Mario hoists atop the tree a flag of the Literacy Campaign; this act signals the transition to the film's closing documentary section. These events of the sacred tree coincide with a parallel increasing masculine conquest of "nature," especially with Mario's triumphant performance during the wild animal hunt. This hunt foreshadows and essentially mirrors his later victory during the counter-revolutionary hunt that takes place in the same "natural" swampland space.

Following this presentation of Mario in "nature," we have a specific moment where Mario passes through latency. In an innocent courtship ritual, Mario and the virgin sit at the seaside. Previously they had been together in a number of scenes in which they had exchanged words and/or furtive glances amidst group settings. Only in this sequence are the girl and Mario seen alone together. We know they feel mutually attracted to each other, so they have an opportunity for consummation. That is explicit. Yet visually the two remain genitally inactive. At the same time, the scene has a structural dynamic that indicates a profound level of seduction.

The scene had been preceded by Gonzalo's pledge to help Mario defeat fear. The seaside setting reactivates the reference to a natural zone, yet only here does the sea figure in the film. We see something of an alien "natural" terrain, estranged from the established filmic space. It is not the nature already well marked by contradictions between revolutionary access and counter-revolutionary harboring. The sea carries conventional lifegiving symbolism. Here it suggests a poetic respite, where the lovers' action will unfold well above the mire of textual conflicts. Yet such a romantic reading would overlook the narrative "seduction."

The girl pleads to share in all of Mario's knowledge. Mario answers, "Won't you study sewing?" She asks, "What will you study?" He answers, "Medicine." She responds, "Then that's what I'll study". In this sequence, not only does Mario settle upon an appropriate choice of attraction, but the previously unclaimed virgin, although narratively not made love to, has now been structurally appropriated via Mario by the revolution's agenda.

This structured seduction — the structural convergence of virginity's textual significance with the film's overall masculine design — parallels the girl's narrative bonding to Mario. The way the narrative works out her virginal textual positioning punctuates her figure as less of a character and more literally as a prop. Superfluous as the geography of this scene may seem, innocent as this romantic encounter might appear, all the components here support the way the narrative edifies masculine privilege. Toward this edification, the key structural element becomes precisely the virgin. Never granted a name in the text and never seen in relation to a familial context of her own, her figure circulates throughout as a solidly objectified prop.

In fact, the extent of the young woman's objectification seems to exceed that of the

sacred tree and of the counter-revolutionaries. For at least they find elaboration on the level of material history. They can assume identities which suggest potentials for transgressing the limits of narrative containment. Undeniably, Cuban revolutionary history testifies to the fact that unchecked superstition and counter-revolution signify respective levels of social disorder. However, within the same cultural context, the very evocation of virginity (unqualified by considerations of female desire and choice) indicates order, or more specifically, signals the "Order" of male privilege. Thus, the girl here remains a thoroughly anonymous and ahistoricized cue. Her figure bears reference only to virginity. That invariable "purity" reduces her textual function to being available to Mario. Her "availability" creates the structural dynamics of this scene.

Mario's encounter later with the "whore" allows him an Oedipal resolution. The visual terms of the sequence where that occurs resolve a highly condensed theme about castration. Mario is invited into defector's wife Olga's house. He sits with her on the bed. As he begins to inquire as to why she does not go to his Literacy classes, she silences him by saying that she can teach him something. She embraces and kisses him. In turn, he reciprocates. As they lie down, she assumes the "dominant" position over him. He opens his eyes, catching an off-screen sight, and he expresses fear. After that, in a reverse shot we see a tight close-up of a disapproving black and white face of defector Juan gazing directly into the camera. As the camera pulls back we see it was a photograph. Then Mario pushes Olga away, runs from the bed, and exits. Here the film cuts back to Juan's image.

Childless and sexually promiscuous, Olga exists in the film only to reinforce the antisocial designs of her man, Juan, her counter-revolutionary and possibly homosexually inclined husband. This scene depicts the loss Mario would be threatened with, should he submit to the perverse disorder which Olga signifies. Olga is not only shown as perverse by her association with her husband, but by her total "availability" as woman within the accepted economy of masculine sexual behavior.

The film, in fact, devalues all the women characters' sexuality. Those characters seem amorphous and have a shifting quality in which their narrative roles collapse according to the overriding structural imperative to fight counter-revolution. The film gives us the surrogate mother and the virgin on the plane of redeemability, and the biological mother and the virgin on the plane of irredeemability. Even the whore functions as a mother-figure with whom Mario explicitly plays out both the Oedipal and Primal scenes.

Whatever "characters" these female figures were to play, in fact they primarily exist to mark the text as sites for Mario's possession and renunciation. They merge into the composite of the text's motive to nurture the hero's masculinity. They condense to a single referent of "the mother." Thus, the text's feminine paradigm can be seen in terms of a single functional design. "Mothering" acquires a collective dimension that conforms to the film's social agenda and into which even Olga's morally disqualified character is allowed to figure.

By these terms then, the scene with Olga is semi-incestuous. Its negation unfolds along the lines of a moral imperative that has no immediately apparent narrative logic. Mario knows full well that Olga's husband is the defector. This knowledge itself marks Olga's sexual availability as more or less permissible since the film thus

implies that her moral character remains beyond salvation. Furthermore, prior to Juan's defecting, Mario personally encountered that man's abuse, so that just a close-up of Juan's photographic image here should not elicit such a weight of moral regard for his wife's honor. Yet, by the terms of this scene, it is exactly Juan's photograph that stands as the locus of prohibition, the point at which extra-textual authority, the law of the father, enters.

Beyond that, this image of Juan's black and white photograph is the only time such a visual document is used within the fiction. As I pointed out earlier, in Cuban film practice, documentary codes signal extra-textuality. As such a code, Juan's photographic image matches and morally contrasts only with the closing documentary bracket structured around the central governing image of Fidel Castro. Juan's image here thus draws for its reading upon the spectator's experience of documentary form.

The scene's configurative dynamics indicate a displaced Oedipal resolution. The scene matches the theme of correct masculine libidinal orientation to that of correct social organization, so that the right thing to do as a man becomes synonymous with the right thing to be within the revolution. The scene resolves the implication of incestuousness and resolves anti-sociality. It severs off counter-revolutionary disorder. Olga had figured within the generalized maternalization of the text's feminine paradigm. In severing with her, Mario's detachment from the maternal guarantees that he will submit to the order of paternal authority, here structurally encoded in the very space of disorder as a "documentary" photograph.

By virtue of this scene, the narrative assures that Mario's masculine organization will develop away from the influence of the counter-revolutionary disorder. His ideological affinity is established. In a later scene depicting Olga, he functions explicitly on behalf of revolutionary order, monitoring counter-revolution from the narrative vantage of opposition.

Mario and another male community member approach Olga's house and look in through a hole in the wall. Through their eyes, we see Olga and Juan on the bed. Juan has returned with a message for Olga from his counter-revolutionary team. She must secure a boat for their escape and meet them at a certain time and place in the swamps. Olga resists and is threatened with death if she does not comply. We see a shot of the eyes of Mario and his peer looking in. Inside, Juan moves to have sex. Olga resists, warning Juan that he should leave, but then she submits. Mario and his friend turn and leave.

While this scene seems to refer to revolutionary vigilance, its spatial properties suggest the configuration of the Primal Scene. For the male, the significance of the Primal Scene rests in part on the boy's misperception of feminine sexuality, understood in terms of connotations of paternal violence and possession. How do these terms translate here? First, that men can appropriate female sexuality already indicates the scene's reliance on the cultural economy of Hispanic machismo. Add to this the way the scene depicts female sexuality as the passive site for masculine sexual performance, and we can see the scene's dependence on a notion of aggression.

In fact, the film narrative shows that Mario's ideological sexual development depends on his initiation into an escalating order of aggressive masculine

performances. This scene sets up a fundamental confusion and displaces all the Primal terms of sexual difference onto the issue of counter-revolution. If Olga is a maternalized figure, here her depiction only pulls the text's feminine paradigm further into the space of "disorder." Confused by its textual alignments with counter-revolution, the "feminine" ultimately suffers divestiture from the very arena of Cuban revolutionary history.

By displacing Primal sexual dynamics altogether onto the space of disorder, the text strategically relegates to that disorder male competition and rivalry. This scene bears no formal ruptures directly invoking extra-textuality, as with the photograph that had a structural relation to Castro's image. This scene unfolds strictly according to the narrative terms of established ideological oppositions, with Mario by now figuring firmly in the interest of revolution. In fact, with the knowledge about the counter-revolutionaries gained by this scene, the narrative can move to showing their defeat, which operates as the film's climax.

The climax itself signals the effective termination of Mario's fictional significance. In the narrative moments around Mario's departure, we can find cues to his by now extra-textual significance. In a classroom farewell scene Gonzalo leads the community in bestowing praise upon Mario and best wishes for his future medical career. Here the young girl figures for the first and last time since the seaside sequence. A shot/reverse shot places the girl into the text's direct gaze pattern. The significance of her entry into that pattern derives from the extent to which Mario here has been delivered inextricably into the masculinized revolutionary order. We could read her narratively as the rejected sweetheart. Yet structurally she is more like the abandoned mother. Furthermore, her sustained virginal value prefigures the film's closing shot (to be discussed shortly) by which the female spectator is urged to reconcile her extra-textual positioning according to culturally prescribed terms of sexual honor and availability.

Then, in a surrogate-family farewell scene, Mario takes leave of the parental figures as his farewell gestures draw into the familial configuration a broader spectrum of community members. Finally, he appropriates the sacred tree. Riding away from the community with other Literacy volunteers, Mario commandeers their hoisting of a Literacy Campaign flag atop the tree. As we see the tree with flag, accompanied by voice-over group chant of the Literacy Campaign anthem, the film cuts to a close-up of Mario looking up to the flag and then dissolves to black and white documentary footage of Havana streets crowded with returning Literacy volunteers, accompanied by same voiceover anthem chant. Viewers then see an intercut shot of Che Guevara followed by footage of Castro. This is followed visually by shots of children and parents embracing, closing on a freeze-frame of a mother-son embrace.

The closing cinematic scheme seems deceptively obvious. Parallel the fictional narrative with documentary substantiation and suggestively validate the artifice through its capacity to be reflected in documentary evidence. However, there is considerable artifice in the documentary form itself.

Generally, the dynamics of New Latin American documentary raise challenging questions about representation. In Latin America the cultural flow of knowledge and information is usually regulated according to bourgeois, strictly hierarchical, social systems of State and economic privilege.

In Cuba, cinematic documentary has been privileged with an authority that derives largely from shared social assumptions that its images reflect a reality of social experience. Cuban viewers agree that the State itself and its cultural institutions are invested with a mandate for collective social reconstruction and the rewriting of history. Thus, in Cuba the appropriate authority for new documentary form seems to come from the democratized expanse of social participants, who are then film viewers. Hence, the filmmaker assumes an immediate, identificatory trajectory between documentary and spectator.

In Cuban cinema's frequent formal conjunction of fictional narrative and documentary, this readership system may obscure the extent to which the documentary footage must submit to the terms of the fiction in order to effectively mirror the fiction's meaning. In this practice the filmmakers manipulate documentary's otherwise socially authorized "reflective" capacity. That is, the extra-textual significance of documentary representations must be reshaped and re-edited to correspond to highly mediated terms of fiction. In *EL BRIGADISTA*, while the inclusion of documentary form sets up for the audience an all important extra-textual linkage, that linkage becomes compromised. The documentary footage must have a close structural bond with the way the film necessarily manipulates its fictional design.

On its own, the terms of the film's closing documentary bracket seem clear enough: the celebration welcoming home to Havana of hundreds of young male and female Literacy volunteers and their reuniting with friends and family. However, when we trace these terms to their fictional correspondents, the reading becomes problematic. The fictional narrative thread to this extra-textual tracing comes from Mario's character development. The celebration here is then about his delivery to revolutionary commitment via his masculinization.

Finally, the fiction assures that viewers read this documentary footage in terms of the fiction's particular sexual politics. Consequently, the spectator's identificatory trajectory — what one would take away from this documentary bracket ending this specific fiction — becomes informed according to that version of sexual politics. The documentary bracket's design for a specific social stance now rests on the film's overall textual scheme of sexuality and gender identification.

The closing mother-son freeze punctuates the familial configuration. A father, visually absent, becomes functionally present via the central agent that authorizes the documentary segment, namely Castro's image. According to the text's narrative terms, the family must not suggest private self-containment nor nuclear isolation. Rather it must serve as a catalyst for socialist collective consciousness and nationhood. In this sense, the familial configuration suggested by that closing freeze-frame takes on an unsettling religious connotation at the same time that it corresponds to the film's sexual politics. The Cuban family has been reduced to a symbolic configuration of omniscient father, redeemed son, and virgin mother.

The spectator's own sexual positioning must fall in line with the moral positions represented by this edified triad. In fact, such conformity is familiar from the Oedipal economy of machismo. The male son is the most rewarded product as he competitively emulates the father. The young man performs upon and appropriates the field of feminine availability. Consequently, the mother as "taken" must

constantly emotionally provide and deny availability so as to maintain her value. She stands in opposition to that other side of the "feminine paradox" occupied by the whore and male homosexual. However, in the interest of masculine sexual privilege, both sides of the feminine are equal game.

Thus, we can ask, "Where in the trajectory of extra-textual linkage does this film position the female spectator, especially in relation to the male?" I propose that the film problematically invests this placement in endorsing a culturally specific, patrocentric order of sexual difference. The key positions in this text's Oedipal scheme are the collectivized ones. The narrative offers a structural economy of zones or types of discourse: historical voice (father), fictional artifice (mother), and textual imperative (masculine delivery).

These sexualized zones supersede any actual father, mother, child designations fictionally enacted. The diffuseness of such a system accounts for the text's scrambled Oedipal aspect — a scramble whose decoding calls for a critical mapping of the unique positions claimed by State and tradition.

This film's Oedipal dynamic suggests an inconsistent parallel with a certain social effect of the Cuban revolution itself. The unifying affective bonds between child and parent have often been displaced onto the bonding of youth with the State. This displacement's strongest impetus originally came from the Literacy Campaign.

One of the Literacy Campaign's most important contributions to restructuring Cuban society was the opportunity it provided for young women's politicization. The Literacy Campaign broke down the kind of confinement which young women endured (and continue to endure in other regions of Latin America) within the traditional Hispanic family. It is important to regard this cultural development in terms of displacement. It, too, seems to have shifted the focus of Oedipal signification from the individualizing ideology of "Capitalist" familial practices to the collectivizing ideology of "Socialist" community.

"In Socialism the family acquires great importance as the natural cell of social development and the basic nucleus within which a community education must begin, so that children and young people may develop solid and permanent habits of mutual aid, collectivity, love for the Socialist homeland, for study and for work, for social discipline and strength of character."[\[12\]](#)

However, this shift to collectivity has not clearly amended certain patriarchal tendencies derived from Cuba's more or less typical Hispanic sexual culture. For example, the cult of machismo has attached itself readily to the national cult of revolutionary personalities (e.g., Martí, Guevara, Castro). Additionally, issues of feminism have tended to emerge as matters for state legislation. This model differs, for example, from Nicaraguan revolutionary experience in which women have consistently tried to develop a feminist agenda affecting the social fabric at all its institutional and social levels. Furthermore, while the issue of homosexual rights may not be high on the Sandinista agenda, it is evidently within the realm of popular dialogue to consider homosexual liberties on par with a host of remaining social inequities still to be addressed in Nicaragua.

In Cuba, social considerations of women's issues have been limited mainly to terms affecting family and workplace. Official considerations about women's sexuality did not figure early in Cuba's revolutionary history, outside of the State's prohibiting prostitution and placing high moral value on motherhood and traditional domesticity. Yet, because the country needed economic, industrial, and cultural reconstruction, this initial ascription of maternal value soon gave way to a series of legislation designed to promote the workplace as the viable space for women's social contribution. Only well after this effort was made toward labor equality was the domestic-labor-sharing law enacted, requiring male spouses to contribute to domestic chores and childcare if the wife was also working. At the same time, a considerable amount of legislation has taken place designed to reform the traditional and religiously informed dictates of family practice, now taking marriage out of church jurisdiction and recognizing the equal rights of women in such matters as divorce, child custody and alimony, and community property.

Finally, since the emergence of "Western feminism," an underlying assertion accompanying Cuban feminist policy has been calculated to differentiate the Cuban motives informing their policies of gender equalization from "Western feminism." That distinction follows from a theoretical assumption that certain dynamics of "Western feminist" sexual politics reflect basic interests which are not particularly socialist.

A significant result of such policy has been effectively to countermand any move that might resemble the trend of "Western" left-feminist-gay aligning the defense of homosexual rights with political agendas affecting women. In Cuba women's social organizing still restricts any discussion of feminine sexuality to issues serving the procreative family. Thus, sexuality can be discussed politically only insofar as that discussion supports such service, that is to say, only insofar as it is heterosexually informed.

Meritorious as these initiatives have been to equalize the status of women in Cuba, they still operate in conjunction with a cultural framework that takes as unquestionable the normative values attaching to heterosexuality. Cuba subscribes to this sexual order on interlocking levels: on the level of tradition (machismo), of social institutions (this film analysis as a case in point), and of State apparatus (legislation privileging heterosexual bonding and outlawing homosexuality). To deny an expanded theoretical and political vision of sexual practice functions to enforce the continuance of power imbalances which necessarily derive from such rigid stagings of prescribed gender identifications and sexual relations.

POSTSCRIPT

Six years after originally analyzing *EL BRIGADISTA*, I find it important to place my critique in context. While I stand by my textual analysis of the film, I must, at the same time, recognize the passing of the historical movement within which I undertook that analysis. In 1985 this project sought to offer a direction in textual analysis that might contribute to the lesbian and gay critique of media culture. Most notably, at that time Lourdes Arguelles and B. Ruby Rich put forth positions regarding the state of sexual politics in post-Mariel Cuba.[13] In an important way, Arguelles and Rich's critical intervention clarified terms for a debate that could constructively promote dialogue between all parties involved. Among the most significant parties involved in the debate around Cuban sexual politics were the

U.S. lesbian and gay communities which had mobilized tremendous concern and resources to assist hundreds of gay Cubans exiled to the U.S. in the Mariel Flotilla of 1980.

What Arguelles and Rich directly confronted in the mid-1980s was a tendency within the gay community to allow its sensitivity toward sexual oppression in Cuba to accommodate a categorical Cold War condemnation of the Revolution. The mid-80s represented a pivotal moment in U.S./Caribbean/Central American relations. With U.S. invading Grenada and escalating military aggression in El Salvador and against Nicaragua, this period proved to be a highly strategic threshold whereby the Reagan government consolidated its "disinformation" apparatus. This was also a pivotal period in the rise of responsible AIDS awareness. Let's not forget that one of the earliest misconceptions about AIDS was that it entered the U.S. from the Caribbean by way of Haiti and Cuban refugees.

At that time, Arguelles and Rich opened up a forum for interrogating sex, gender, and cultural politics in Cuba while remaining sensitive to North American myths surrounding Cuban history. For an inquiry into Cuban sexual politics to be truly constructive, Cuba had to become a party to the dialogue. If the critique of sexual and gender-related, Cuban policies were to be more than a pretext for the propaganda war against the Revolution, the historical record of the Revolution itself had to be evaluated while measuring Cuba's social policy directions. That is, what can reasonably be expected from a society seeking to emerge from a history of extreme underdevelopment while being relentlessly pitted as a pawn in the Cold War geopolitical apparatus? Critics must acknowledge those instances, however minimal by Northern standards, where Cuban doctrine and policy have yielded to demands for gender and sexual empowerment and dignity. Furthermore, in the interests of debate and dialogue, critical perspectives from the U.S. must invite the perspectives and interpretations offered by a broad spectrum of Cuban popular experience and "official" leadership regarding the state of sexual and gender liberty in Cuba. It is in the spirit of Arguelles and Rich's complex challenge in the mid-80s that I wrote the above critique of *EL BRIGADISTA*.

By 1985, the Cuban Film Institute, ICAIC, had built a significant film tradition of "feminist" themes and texts. Such films as *LUCIA* (1968), *PORTRAIT OF TERESA* (1979), or *PATAKIN* (1983) can be critically interpreted as reducing the social practice of gender to issues about labor and productive national economy. Still, they do take part in that ongoing discourse within Cuban revolutionary culture which problematizes gender representation by placing it in a certain textual forefront. These texts threaten to shake up certain narrative and formal conventions and offer more pro-active frames for representing women. In contrast, *EL BRIGADISTA* has a conservative, patriarchal posture about women's social position within the Revolution. And in looking at the film's overall gender representation, the possibility of a homophobic subtext begs to be addressed. That is the objective of my analysis.

As the world enters the 1990s, there should be more room than ever before for interrogating Stalinist political chauvinism and puritanism. Unfortunately, Cuba is no less a pawn in U.S. foreign policy's rhetoric and no less a target of the symbolic and material arsenal which the U.S. deploys toward the goal of hemispheric domination. In addition, AIDS' spread defies the marginalizing borders of officially

designated "high risk groups." Societies worldwide, the U.S. no less than Cuba, recoil from responsibly confronting the crisis due to the cross purposes of "morality" and life-affirming social policy.

Finally, among George Bush's initial executive actions was to authorize funds to, develop and implement Television Martí to supplement the broadcast transmission of Radio Martí. While much of the world mobilizes and struggles to realize cultural and political self-determination, we have no indication that the Bush administration has understood the 1989 revolutions, much less wholeheartedly endorsed them. In fact, to an alarming extent, we have evidence that the Bush government is moving in a concerted direction toward an unyielding program of Big Stick diplomacy and Monroe Doctrine resolve. It's a direction that threatens to make Reagan's Caribbean/Latin America policies seem almost "humanitarian" by comparison. Thus it is as crucial as ever for us to understand and appreciate the Cuban revolutionary experience if we are to responsibly assess Cuban gains and setbacks in the realms of gender and sexual liberation. And the challenge for such an understanding is as beset as ever by the complexities and contradictions which Cuba poses — a society ever under the shadow, the image, and the guns of North American colonialism.

Notes continued on [page 3](#)

[To top](#) [To page 1 of essay](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)

El Brigadista

page 3

from *Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, pp. 37-49

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1990, 2006

NOTES

1. Since the successful completion of the 1962 Literacy Campaign, Cuba has maintained the status of the only fully literate national population in Latin America — an achievement only currently matched by the literacy advances in Nicaragua.

2. Allen Young, *Gays Under the Cuban Revolution* (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1981), pp. 113.

3. "...Cuba's *ley de peligrosidad* (literally, 'the law of dangerousness'), a vaguely worded statute that provides four to six years for 'antisocial behavior.' The law is invoked against gamblers, drunkards, vagrants, prostitutes and other 'dangerous' elements, but its chief targets are the homosexuals." (Young, *Gays*, 52).

Fidel Castro articulates the general Cuban policy on homosexuality in *Castro's Cuba, Cuba's Fidel*, by Lee Lockwood (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), p. 107:

"...we would never come to believe that a homosexual could embody the conditions and requirements of conduct that would enable us to consider him a true Revolutionary, a true Communist militant. A deviation of that nature clashes with the concept we have of what a militant Communist must be."

4. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 1962), p. 88.

5. E. A. Lacey, "Latin America: Myths and Realities," *Gay Sunshine Journal*, 40/41 (1979), 23.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. The distinction must be made between the following: (a) Fidel Castro as maker of history, as active consciousness in the rewriting of history and enunciator of the codes of Cuba's cultural identity; (b) Fidel Castro as symbolic figure in the linguistic currency of that re-writing, as code of that cultural enunciation. It is according to the latter designation that I refer to the image of Castro.

9. Shoshana Felman, "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy," *Diacritics* (Winter, 1975), 3.

10. Excerpt from the "1971 Declaration of the Cuban Cultural Congress," as cited in Herbert L. Matthews, *Revolution in Cuba* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1975), p. 333:

"As for homosexual deviations, they bring up the question of social pathology. It is our principle not to admit its manifestations in any way. Its propagation must be avoided but this complex problem should be resolved on the basis of a profound study which will indicate the measures to be taken..."

"On the subject of homosexuality, the Commission arrived at the conclusion that it was inadmissible that under the pretext of 'artistic talent,' notorious homosexuals should gain influence over our youth..."

"Finally, severe penalties will be applied in the case of the corruption of minors, of systematic depravity and of incorrigible antisocial attitudes."

11. Lacey, "Latin America," p. 23.

12. Excerpt from thesis on "The Role of the Family in Socialism," discussed at the 1974 Cuban Party Congress, as cited in Margaret Randall, *Women in Cuba: Twenty Years Later* (New York: Smyrna Press, 1981), p. 104.

13. Lourdes Arguelles and B. Ruby Rich, "Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Revolution: Notes toward an Understanding of the Cuban Lesbian and Gay Experience, Part I," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 11, No. 6 (1985). See also Lourdes Artuelles and B. Ruby Rich, "The Easy Convenience of Cuban Homophobia," *New York Native* (Oct. 10-23, 1983), 34-35. Ruby Rich, "Bay of Pix," *American Film* (July-Aug. 1984), 57-59.

Voyage en Douce. Entre Nous

The hypothetical lesbian heroine

by Chris Straayer

from *Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, pp. 50-57

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1990, 2006

Feminist film theory based on sexual difference has much to gain from considering lesbian desire and sexuality. Women's desire for women deconstructs male/female sexual dichotomies, sex/gender conflation, and the universality of the oedipal narrative. Acknowledgement of the female-initiated active sexuality and sexualized activity of lesbians has the potential to reopen a space in which straight women as well as lesbians can exercise self-determined pleasure.

This article deals mainly with films that do not depict lesbianism explicitly, but employ or provide sites for lesbian intervention. I chose these films based on my interest in the lesbian viewer, and how her relation to films with covert lesbian content resembles her positioning in society. In textual analyses of *ENTRE NOUS* and *VOYAGE EN DOUCE* — two French films that seemingly oblige different audiences and interpretations — I demonstrate how, rather than enforcing opposite meanings, the films allow for multiple readings which overlap. I use the term "hypothetical" to indicate that neither the character's lesbianism nor her heroism is an obvious fact of the films. I articulate a lesbian aesthetic that is subjective but not idiosyncratic.

In particular, I examine two sites of negotiation between texts and viewers, shifts in the heterosexual structure which are vulnerable to lesbian pleasuring: the lesbian look of exchange, and female bonding. These stand in contrast to the male gaze and its narrative corollary, love at first sight. I then examine the contradictions that arise when the articulation of non-heterosexual subject matter is attempted within a structure conventionally motivated by heterosexuality. Finally, the question inevitably raised by women-only interactions — "Where is the man?" — inspires a radical disclosure of sex as historically and socially constructed and a redefinition of subjectivity.

FEMINIST FILM THEORY: GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND VIEWERSHIP

Within the construction of narrative film sexuality, the phrase "lesbian heroine" is a contradiction in terms. The female position in classical narrative is a stationary site to which the male hero travels and on which he acts. The relationship between male and female is one of conquest. The processes of acting and receiving are thus genderized.[1][[open notes in new window](#)]

There can be no lesbian heroine here, for the very definition of lesbianism requires an act of defiance in relation to assumptions about sexual desire and activity. Conventional filmic discourse can only accommodate the lesbian heroine as a hero, as "male." Yet maleness is potentially irrelevant to lesbianism, if not to lesbians.

The lesbian heroine in film must be conceived of as a viewer construction, short-circuiting the very networks that attempt to forbid her energy. She is constructed from contradictions within the text and between text and viewer, who insists on assertive, even transgressive, identifications and seeing.

The Hollywood romance formula of love at first sight relies on a slippage between sexuality and love. Sexual desire pretends to be reason enough for love, and love pretends to be sexual pleasure. While cinema makes sexual desire visually available for viewers' vicarious experiences, sexual pleasure is blocked. By the time the plot reaches a symbolic climax, love becomes substituted for sex, restricting sex to the realm of desire. So structured, love is unrequited sex. Since this love is hetero-love, homosexual viewers are doubly distanced from sexual pleasure.

The sexual gaze as elaborated in much feminist film theory remains a male prerogative, a unidirectional gaze from male onto female, pursuing a downward slant in relation to power. In contrast, the lesbian look that I describe requires exchange. It looks for a returning look, not just a receiving look. It sets up two-directional sexual activity.

Considerable work by feminist film theorists has attempted to articulate operations of looking in narrative film texts and film spectatorship. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey described how the patriarchal unconscious has structured classical cinema with visual and narrative pleasure specifically for the heterosexual male viewer, gratifying his narcissistic ego via a surrogate male character who condones and relays the viewer's look at the woman character, and providing him voyeuristic pleasure via a more direct, non-narrative presentation of the woman as image (rather than character). Since woman's "otherness" from man depends on her "lack" (of a penis), this erotic image elicits the male viewer's castration anxiety, which cinema eases by visual and narrative operations of fetishism and sadism. In Mulvey's words,

"The scopophilic instinct (pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object), and, in contradistinction, ego libido (forming identification processes) act as formations, mechanisms, which this cinema has played on. The image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the structure of representation, adding a further layer demanded by the ideology of the patriarchal order as it is worked out in its favorite cinematic form — illusionistic narrative film. The argument returns again to the psychoanalytic background in that woman as representation signifies castration, inducing voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent her threat. None of these interacting layers is intrinsic to film, but it is only in the film form that they can reach a perfect and beautiful contradiction, thanks to the possibility in the cinema of shifting the emphasis of the look." [2]

Although Mulvey's article remains invaluable in addressing patriarchal dominance as the ideological status quo formally enforced by/in the mainstream cinema/text, it does not account for other sexual forces and experiences within society. Mulvey's arguments have been constructively elaborated, revised, and rebutted by many other feminist film theorists. However, much of this work has brought about an unproductive slippage between text and actuality which presses this exclusive patriarchal structure onto the world. This critical narrowness excludes the reactions of "deviant" participants in the film event from theory's discursive event. Even though the spectator's psychology remains formed within a culture that collapses sexual/anatomical difference onto gender, the same culture also contains opposing factors and configurations which generate many discourses which instigate psychological diversity. It is this diversity rather than cinema's dominant ideology that we must examine in order to deconstruct the alignment of male with activity and female with passivity.

In a later article, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by DUEL IN THE SUN," Mulvey suggests that female viewers experience Freud's "true heroic feeling" through masculine identification with active male characters, a process which allows this spectator "to rediscover that lost aspect of her sexual identity, the never fully repressed bedrock of feminine neurosis." With her "own memories" of masculinity, a certain "regression" takes place in this deft "trans-sex identification"; like returning to her past daydreams of action, she experiences viewer pleasure. Nevertheless, "the female spectator's phantasy of masculinisation is always to some extent at cross purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes." [3]

Such a confusion of clothing with sex, and of both with desire for action, accepts the limitations of sex-role stereotyping in the text. True, such desire on the part of female viewers usually requires identification with male characters, but this is a limitation of mainstream cinema, not a "regression" on the part of women.

By not addressing mechanisms of gay spectatorship, the above scheme denies such pleasure or suggests that it is achieved from the heterosexual text via transvestite ploys. Mainstream cinema's nearly total compulsory heterosexuality does require homosexual viewers to appropriate heterosexual representations for homosexual pleasure. However, "transvestite" viewer-text interaction, described by Mulvey and others, should not be confused with gay or bisexual viewership.

Mary Ann Doane understands this cross-gender identification by female viewers as one means of achieving distance from the text. In "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator," she argues that, because woman's preoedipal bond with the mother continues to be strong throughout her life (unlike man's), the female viewer — unless she utilizes specific devices — is unable to achieve that distance from the film's textual *body* which allows man the process of voyeurism.

"For the female spectator there is a certain over-presence of the image — she is the image. Given the closeness of this relation, the female spectator's desire can be described only in terms of a kind of narcissism — the female look demands a becoming." [4]

As a result, woman overidentifies with cinema's female victims, experiencing a pleasurable reconnection that is necessarily masochistic. Because her body lacks

the potential for castration, "woman is constructed differently in relation to the process of looking." [5]

Doane goes on to describe an alternate strategy for women to overcome proximity and mimic a distance from the(ir) image — the masquerade of femininity.

"Above and beyond a simple adoption of the masculine position in relation to the cinematic sign, the female spectator is given two options: the masochism of over-identification or the narcissism entailed in becoming one's own object of desire, in assuming the image in the most radical way. The effectivity of masquerade lies precisely in its potential to manufacture a distance from the image, to generate a problematic within which the image is manipulable, producible, and readable to woman." [6]

The primary question that followed Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" was: How can women's film viewing pleasure be understood? Although subsequent feminist film theory drawing on psychoanalysis successfully opened up that field for feminist purposes and raised significant new questions, the answers it has provided — elaborations of particular processes of masochism, transvestism, and masquerade — remain only partially sufficient to the original question. Much of this work has circumvented a crucial option in female spectatorship by avoiding the investigation of women viewers' erotic attraction to and visual appreciation of women characters. [7]

Further work needs to examine how viewers determine films as much as how films determine viewers. And, care should be taken that the theorized transvestite or bisexual viewer does not inadvertently suppress the homosexual viewer.

EROTICIZING LOOKS BETWEEN WOMEN CHARACTERS

Visual exchanges between same-sex characters typically are nonsexual. The challenge becomes to eroticize these looks. The homosexual viewer has this goal when she/he brings her/his desires to the heterosexual raw material and representational system of the text. Occasionally she/he collaborates with texts to excavate subtexts and uncover ambivalence in the patriarchal "order."

Since the heterosexual structure of the gaze is already established as sexual, viewers or directors can build on it to accomplish an erotic homosexual look. One might argue that simply substituting woman for man as owner of the gaze accomplishes an erotic lesbian look. To some extent this is true, and has been done quite successfully by Donna Deitch in *DESERT HEARTS* (1985), which Deitch describes in the film's publicity materials as "just a love story, like any love story between a man and a woman." Though certainly erotic, *DESERT HEARTS* inherits certain problems from the traditional structure it follows. Insidious class stereotypes and clichés invade the film to provide the requisite power imbalance. For example, working class women are assumed to be sexually liberated compared to the inhibited female professor. And eventually, as in countless love stories before this one, "love" overcomes/denies class boundaries.

SHEER MADNESS (1983, Margarethe von Trotta) initially employs a heterosexual gaze, then alters its direction. Hanna Schygulla sings the first verse of "Will You

Still Love Me Tomorrow" to her male lover, but turns to look at a woman friend during the next verse. The first direction of her glance toward a man both eroticizes it and distinguishes it from a male's "downward" glance. Her ongoing song provides continuity as these characteristics carry over into the second glance, charging it with lesbian possibilities.

In *THE COLOR PURPLE* (1985, Steven Spielberg), Shug Avery sings and dances for a sexually mixed audience in a tavern. Her suggestive use of a costume prop as a phallic object, which she pulls rhythmically towards herself, elicits appreciative sounds from the males. Thus eroticized, however, she sings her next song to Celie, another woman. The men looking at Shug sufficiently confirm her sexuality, which then eroticizes her look at Celie. Such heterosexual pre-structuring, however, can eroticize women's looking and counter lesbianism simultaneously.

I do not intend to imply here that heterosexual presence is the only means of eroticizing women's interactions. Several examples illustrate other strategies. In *LA FEMME DE L'HOTEL* (1984, Lea Pool) the absence of heterosexuality encourages lesbian readings. Its only prominent male character is the main (female) character's brother, and he is gay. Even while precluding heterosexuality, however, this gay male foregrounds its absence. This is particularly clear, for example, in a scene where he relaxes on a bed watching television while his sister undresses and gets into bed nude behind him. Such scenes both suggest and forbid sexuality and unhinge desire, freeing it to settle between women characters.

In *LIANNA* (1982, John Sayles), a lesbian "coming out" story, a lesbian exchange of looks is split into two separate looks. Although the two looks complement each other in relation to the main character Lianna, each is unidirectional and maintains its sexual energy through traditional objectification. In a lesbian bar, Lianna feels "looked at" by the other women. Later, on the street, Lianna is suddenly sensitized to the female population as she does the watching.

In *SHEER MADNESS* Hanna Schygulla stands facing the film audience while a second woman watches her from a window behind her. As if able to feel this look, Schygulla acknowledges it by turning away from the film audience and towards the woman, sealing a look between them. If the viewer's engagement in this scene has been primarily one of looking at Schygulla, he or she is now shut out. However, if the viewer has been identifying with Schygulla's feeling of being looked at, he or she turns with Schygulla, vicariously experiencing her visual exchange with the second woman. These two processes, of course, are not mutually exclusive.

Such independently structured glances between women, however, are outside conventional definition, and therefore threaten. The ultimate threat of eye contact between women, inherent in all scenes of female bonding, is the elimination of the male. Nowhere is this more explicitly played out than in Marleen Gorris's *A QUESTION OF SILENCE* (1982), in which eyeline matches among three women in a boutique precipitate their collaborative murder of the male boutique owner. Any erotic exchange of glances between women requires counter-efforts to disempower and de-eroticize them.

I now will focus on two films, both open to lesbian readings, that are interesting for their similarities and differences. *VOYAGE EN DOUCE* (Michele Deville, 1980) is an erotic art film, bordering on "soft porn," about two women who take a trip to the

country together. They exchange fantasies and flirtations, then return home to their male partners. *ENTRE NOUS* (Diane Kurys, 1983) also deals with the interactions between two women, but their relationship leans ostensibly towards the buddies genre. They too take a trip away from their husbands. The women demonstrate growing mutual affection and, at the film's conclusion, they are living together. Although the two films appear opposite — one pseudo-lesbian soft porn serving a male audience, the other feminist and appealing to a female audience — this dichotomy is deconstructed once viewers are actively involved.

VOYAGE EN DOUCE is particularly interesting in relation to looking. Its opening scene situates the main narrative adventure as a "departure" from the conventional male gaze. From front row seats, Helene and her male lover watch a female singer perform. A shot from the male's point-of-view focuses on the singer's cleavage and thus defines his gaze as sexual. Subsequent eyeline matches between him and the singer invite and endorse his gaze. The scene ends with a long shot of the concert hall, now empty save for this explicitly privileged male viewer and the woman singer still on stage locked in his gaze. This opening scene seems disconnected from the film's plot and is, in fact, outside an important framing device (described below) that demarcates Helene and Lucie's shared story. The scene's connection to the women's travels thus appears thematically causal.

Instead of resolution, *VOYAGE EN DOUCE* attempts sustained sexual desire. According to the conventions of pornography, the erotic involvement of two women functions as foreplay for a heterosexual climax. This does not happen in *VOYAGE EN DOUCE*. Erotic looking and flirting between women is thematic in this film. The lesbian desire this stimulates is accentuated by a hierarchical looking structure that mimics the male gaze. Throughout the film, a blonde woman, Helene, played by Dominique Sanda, is the more active looker and the text's primary visual narrator. Primarily "through her eyes," we see sexual fantasies visualized on the screen. When taking nude photographs of her brunette companion Lucie, played by Geraldine Chaplin, a camera prop "equips" Helene/Sanda for this male role.

Helene is also the primary pursuer in the narrative, while Lucie functions to stimulate, tease and frustrate that desire. The film's episodic structure — another convention of pornography — alternates between the women's individual sexual stories and fantasies and their erotically charged interactions. Helene pampers and grooms Lucie, appreciates her visually, and verbally reassures her about her beauty and desirability. This serves to build both generalized sexual desire and more specific lesbian desire. In both cases, a series of narrative denials and delays establishes an "interruptus" motif.

Early in the film, a point-of-view shot shows Lucie looking at Helene's breast, which Helene quickly covers. Later, when Helene purposely exposes her breast to excite Lucie, Lucie does not respond. Helene recalls an erotic moment from their childhood, which Lucie claims not to remember. Lucie does remember wanting to kiss Helene, but when asked if she still wants to, she answers no. When photographing Lucie, Helene encourages her to remove her clothes. Lucie does so hesitantly and coquettishly, but when Helene attempts to take the final nude shot, she is out of film.

In several scenes Helene and Lucie exchange unmediated glances, as do the two

women characters in *ENTRE NOUS* — Lena, played by Isabelle Huppert, and Madeline, played by Miou Miou. Such exchanges, which occur primarily within two-person shots, gain sexual energy from the women's physical proximity and subtle body contact. The fact that two women share the film frame encourages this lesbian reading, i.e., the women are consistently framed as a "couple." This visual motif provides a pleasurable homosexual content which is frustrated by the plot.[8]

However, the absence of a shot-reverse-shot reciprocal point-of-view pattern in these two-shots excludes the viewer from experiencing the looking. Thus, the viewer's identification with the women's looking is necessarily more sympathetic than empathic.

In *ENTRE NOUS*, the addition of a mirror to such a shot establishes a second internal frame. The reciprocal point-of-view exchange achieved between these two simultaneous frames — a two-shot of the women looking at each other through the mirror — allows the viewer to be sutured into the looking experience, while also experiencing the pleasure of seeing the two women together. It is notable that during this shot, the women are nude and admiring each other's breasts.

A similar construction occurs temporally instead of spatially when, in a sequence in the garden, the camera temporarily identifies with the look and movement of Lena/ Huppert approaching Madeline/Miou Miou through a subjective tracking shot, and then holds steady while Lena enters the frame. The viewer is carried into the women's space via an identification with Lena's look, then observes their embrace from an invited vantage point. This is followed by a shot of Madeline's father and son watching disapprovingly — a look from outside. Standing together, hand in hand, these two males foreground the generation missing between them — Madeline's husband. Hence their look both acknowledges and checks the dimensions of the women's visual exchange.

VOYAGE EN DOUCE also contains abundant mirror shots, some of which similarly conduct visual exchanges between the characters, while others seem to foreground hierarchical erotic looking. In particular, several mirror shots occur in which the two women examine Lucie's image while Helene compliments and/or grooms her.

FEMALE BONDING IN FILM

What becomes evident from these examples is that, when one searches for lesbian exchange in narrative film construction, one finds a constant flux between competing forces to suggest and deny it. As with sexuality in general, efforts to subdue lesbian connotations can stimulate innovations. Female bonding and the exchange of glances between women threaten heterosexual and patriarchal structures. When female bonding occurs in feature narrative film, its readiness for lesbian appropriation is often acknowledged by internal efforts to forbid such conclusions.

Conceptually, female bonding is a precondition for lesbianism. If women are situated only in relationship to men or in antagonistic relationship to each other, the very idea of lesbianism is precluded. This partially explains the appreciation lesbian audiences have for films with female bonding. So often has female bonding stood in for lesbian content, that lesbian audiences seem to find it an acceptable displacement at the conclusions of such "lesbian romances" as *PERSONAL BEST*

(1982, Robert Towne) and LIANNA (1982, John Sayles).

The widespread popularity of *ENTRE NOUS* among lesbian audiences depends on basic narrative conditions, which the film reiterates. Most important is female bonding. The film begins with parallel editing between Lena's and Madeline's separate lives. This cross cutting constructs audience expectation and desire for the two women to meet. Once they have met, the two women spend the majority of screen time together. Lesbian viewers experience pleasure in their physical closeness. Though lesbianism is never made explicit in the film, an erotic subtext is readily available. Later in the film, Lena and Madeline are separated when Madeline leaves her husband and moves to Paris. At this time their bonding switches from visual to visual-verbal representation. They no longer share the film frame but a considerable portion of the soundtrack consists of voice-over readings of affectionate letters between them. Thus one woman's voice and the other's image share the temporal confines of these scenes. The specific agenda held by lesbian viewers for female bonding warrants an inside joke at the film's conclusion when Lena and Madeline are finally living together. In the "background" a song plays: "I wonder who's kissing her now. I wonder who's showing her how."

The development of Lena and Madeline's relationship stands in sharp contrast to the development of Lena's marriage. During World War II, she and Michel were prisoners in a camp. Upon his release, Michel was allowed to take a wife out with him. He selected Lena by sight alone. Throughout the film, Michel remains the good provider, which prolongs Lena's dependence on him. In effect, he buys her. Each time she hints at leaving him, he asks how she will survive. The film's sensitivity to the economic disadvantages experienced by women unattached to men is appreciated by lesbian and feminist audiences.

In many ways, female bonding stands as the antithesis of love at first sight. While love at first sight necessarily deemphasizes materiality and context, female bonding is built upon an involvement in specific personal environments. In both *ENTRE NOUS* and *VOYAGE EN DOUCE*, the women's relationships acquire a physical quality from the presence of personal items which, when exchanged, suggest intimacy. Women frequently wear each other's clothes, selecting and modeling them for one another. Body lotion and love letters pass between Lena and Madeline as easily as do cigarettes.

Such bonding activity between women suggests an alternate use for the feminine masquerade. This mutual appreciation of one another's feminine appearance, which achieves intimacy via an attention to personal effects, demonstrates the masquerade's potential to draw women closer together and to function as nonverbal homoerotic expression which connects image to body. This "deviant" employment of the feminine masquerade is in contradistinction to Doane's elaboration of it as a distancing device for women.

Females together on the screen signal simultaneously a lack of sexuality and a forbidden sexuality, both of which upset the film's heterosexual mechanisms. Within these mechanisms, female bonding poses a narrative blandness. Since both filmic and narrative desires are fueled by sexual desire, films often introduce sexual signals to eroticize such framing which contains two women. Once eroticized, however, female bonding threatens to subvert or, worse, circumvent that heterosexual scheme entirely.

The primary threat of female bonding is the elimination of the male. The unstated but always evident question implicit in such films — "Where is the man?" — acknowledges defensive androcentric reactions. Its underlying presence attempts to define female bonding and lesbianism in relation to men. Publicity which accompanies a distribution print of *VOYAGE EN DOUCE* from New Yorker Films describes the film as "What women talk about when men aren't around." In *ENTRE NOUS*, scenes approaching physical intimacy between the two women are juxtaposed with shots signaling the lone male. Depicting female bonding as the exclusion of men moves the defining principle outside the women's own interactions. The lesbian potential, an "unfortunate" by-product of the female bonding configuration, must be checked.

In *VOYAGE EN DOUCE*, Helene and Lucie's excursion is framed by their domestic base, where the presence of their male lovers limits their (and the film's) transgressions. In *ENTRE NOUS*, Lena's husband seems an ideal father to their children. This negates the stereotypical association of lesbianism with man-hating. Lesbian viewers are not unaware nor unconcerned with how general audiences receive female bonding. They can hear the unspoken question — "Where is the man?" *ENTRE NOUS* directs its attack most forcibly at the patriarchal structure, not individual men.

THE MALE INTERMEDIARY

One way to interfere with female bonding is to insert references to men and heterosexuality between women characters. In *ENTRE NOUS*, Madeline and Lena spend a considerable portion of their time together talking about their husbands and lovers. For example, they jointly compose a letter to Madeline's lover. Reassuring references to off-screen males, however, remain a feeble attempt to undermine the visual impact that the women together make.

To be more effective, the interference needs to be visual in order to physically separate the women's bodies and interrupt their glances. Thus *VOYAGE EN DOUCE* literally places a male between the two women. The soft porn approach of *VOYAGE EN DOUCE* relies on titillating the male viewer with lesbian insinuations. Ultimately, however, female characters must remain available to male viewers. In one scene, Helene verbally instructs a young male, placed between the women, on how to kiss Lucie. The inexperienced boy reinforces the male viewer's sense of superior potency — the male viewer is represented but not replaced. In this scene the boy connects the two women as much as he separates them. It is Helene who is sensitive to Lucie's pacing and is manipulating her desire. The boy is an intermediary. Helene's vicarious engagement, however, is confined to the realm of desire. The actual kiss excludes her.

Male intermediaries are common in films with female bonding. In *ENTRE NOUS*, when Lena and Madeline are dancing together in a Paris night club (which opens with a male point-of-view shot at Madeline's ass), two male onlookers become intermediaries by diverting the women's glances and easing the tension created by their physical embrace.

Often, as in the following example from *ENTRE NOUS*, the connection that an intermediary provides is less obvious. Lena is on her way to meet Madeline in Paris

when she has a sexual encounter with an anonymous male. A soldier who shares her train compartment kisses and caresses her. Later, while discussing this experience with Madeline, Lena "comes to realize" that this was her first orgasmic experience.

The scene on the train reasserts Lena's heterosexuality. At the same time, this experience and knowledge of sexual pleasure is more connected to her friendship with Madeline, via their exchange of intimate information, than to her heterosexual marriage of many years. In fact, it is Madeline who recognizes Lena's described experience as an orgasm and identifies it to her. Because the film cuts away from the train scene shortly after the sexual activity begins, the film viewer does not witness Lena's orgasm. Had this train scene continued, her orgasm might have approximated, in film time, the moment when Madeline names it — and Lena gasps. In a peculiar manner, then, Madeline is filmically credited for the orgasm. Likewise, Lena's excited state on the train, her predisposition to sexual activity, might be read as motivated by her anticipation of being with Madeline.

A male's intrusion upon female bonding, then, is just as likely to homoeroticize the situation as to induce corrective heterosexuality. In *ENTRE NOUS*, it is Lena's jealous husband who gives language to the sexual possibilities of their friendship. By calling the women's boutique a "whorehouse," he foregrounds the erotic symbolism that clothing provides. When he calls the women "dykes," he not only reveals the fears of a jealous husband but confirms the audience's perceptions.

While I would not go so far as to equate these two films, it would be naive to dismiss *VOYAGE EN DOUCE* simply as a "rip-off" of lesbianism for male voyeuristic pleasure while applauding *ENTRE NOUS* as "politically correct" lesbianism. In their different ways, *ENTRE NOUS* does just as much to stimulate lesbian desire as does *VOYAGE EN DOUCE*, and *VOYAGE EN DOUCE* frustrates it just as much as *ENTRE NOUS* does. The two films exhibit similar tensions and compromises. As far as any final commitment to lesbianism, *ENTRE NOUS* is no more frank than is *VOYAGE EN DOUCE*. Lesbian reading requires as much viewer initiation in one film as the other.

One could argue that any potential lesbianism in *VOYAGE EN DOUCE* is undermined by heterosexual framing in early and late scenes with Helene's male partner. Another interpretation of this framing device, however, sends conclusions in a different direction. Early in the film, Lucie crouches outside Helene's door. Helene sees Lucie through the railing under the banister as she climbs the stairs to her apartment. When Lucie declares that she is leaving her male partner, Helene takes her into her apartment where they plan a vacation together. At the film's conclusion, the two women return to Helene's apartment. Then Lucie decides to go back to her husband, but Helene decides to leave hers again.

Inadvertently, Helene locks herself out of the apartment without her suitcase. Instead of ringing the doorbell, she crouches in Lucie's earlier position as the camera moves down the stairs to observe her through the railing. One can read this shot as portraying the prison of heterosexuality or domesticity — as a cul-de-sac. Or one can read this pattern as indicating a cyclic structure.

Helene's display of lesbian desire throughout *VOYAGE EN DOUCE* qualifies her as a hypothetical lesbian heroine as much as the women in *ENTRE NOUS*. Ultimately,

these characters' lesbianism remains hypothetical and illusory because of their isolation. The acknowledgment of lesbian desire does not, in either film, acknowledge the condition of lesbianism within culture.

To summarize, *VOYAGE EN DOUCE* and *ENTRE NOUS* are narrative films that exist by right of a language informed by heterosexuality. However, because they deal with women's relations, they also challenge the conventions of this language. The contradictions that result from their use of a heterosexual system for non-heterosexual narratives give rise to innovations that interact with audience expectations to create multiple and ambivalent interpretations. The focus on two women together threatens to establish both asexuality and homosexuality, both of which are outside the heterosexual desire which drives mainstream film and narrative. Therefore, simultaneous actions take place in the text to eroticize the women's interactions and to abort the resulting homoerotics. These very contradictions and opposing intentions cause the gaps and ambiguous figurations that allow lesbian readings.

I have demonstrated three such figurations: the erotic exchange of glances, which contrasts with the unidirectional, hierarchical male gaze articulated by Mulvey; eroticized female bonding, which utilizes the feminine masquerade to achieve closeness, contrasting the use and purpose of the masquerade described by Doane; and the oppositely-sexed intermediary who both separates and connects the same-sexed couple, accomplishing both heterosexuality and homosexuality within the contradictory text. These structures neither replace nor compromise the heterosexual film text and event recognized and analyzed in previous feminist film theory, but rather offer additions and alternatives to account for homosexual viewership and desire.

REVISING BINARY SEXUAL IDEOLOGY

As a woman, the lesbian is defined and situated in culture as opposite to man, as a lack. The lesbian's physical/sexual interactions, however, insist on a different presence which operates outside male determination. It is her womanness, not her lesbianism, that confines her within the patriarchal formation of femininity. I therefore argue that, were lesbians able to situate themselves as another sex, that is, as non-women (and non-men), they could theoretically create a defining model to which men are irrelevant.

In his introduction to *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, Michel Foucault contrasts the allowance of free choice and the coexistence of sexes within one body in the Middle Ages, to the medical/legal relegation of the hermaphrodite to a single "true" sex in the eighteenth century.

"Do we truly need a true sex? With a persistence that borders on stubbornness, modern Western societies have answered in the affirmative. They have obstinately brought into play this question of a "true sex" in an order of things where one might have imagined that all that counted was the reality of the body and the intensity of its pleasures."

"For a long time, however, such a demand was not made, as is proven

by the history of the status which medicine and law have granted to hermaphrodites. Indeed it was a very long time before the postulate that a hermaphrodite must have a sex — a single, true sex — was formulated."

"Biological theories of sexuality, juridical conceptions of the individual, forms of administrative control in modern nations, led little by little to rejecting the idea of a mixture of the two sexes in a single body, and consequently to limiting the free choice of indeterminate individuals. Henceforth, everybody was to have one and only one sex. Everybody was to have his or her primary, profound, determined and determining sexual identity; as for the elements of the other sex that might appear, they could only be accidental, superficial, or even quite simply illusory. From the medical point of view, this meant that when confronted with a hermaphrodite, the doctor was no longer concerned with recognizing the presence of the two sexes, juxtaposed or intermingled, or with knowing which of the two prevailed over the other, but rather with deciphering the true sex that was hidden beneath ambiguous appearances..."[9]

Foucault's insights challenge the very "obvious" criteria used not only to delineate the sexes but to limit their number to two. By denying evidence of a sexual continuum and conceptually precluding a more complex sexual variance in favor of a system of binary opposition, arbitrary and enforced standards for assignment of both sex and sexual behavior are made to seem adequate, primary, and natural.

No attempt to delineate clearly between two "true" sexes has been successful. The exceptions and ambiguities in anatomical and physiological assignments become even more pervasive when considering secondary sex characteristics, hormones, chromosome patterns, and behaviors. Erasing the hermaphrodite from our consciousness allows male and female terms to appear unambiguous and definite. In effect, the hermaphroditism existing within each of these terms is dismissed.

If we understand male and female sexes as constructs, we must ask ourselves what investment empowers them. Certainly within classic narrative film, the language/ expression/ momentum of heterosexual desire relies precisely on this particular system of binary opposition. When, in *ENTRE NOUS*, the soldier sexually pursues Lena, biological difference is assumed sufficient motivation. We do not know what specifically excites him about this woman. Like the previous, "establishing" shot of the train entering a tunnel, he simply pursues her female sex. He "loves" her at first sight.

Within contemporary psycho-linguistic thought, the subject is always male. Because of her different psychological development and relationship to the mother, the female remains connected to the pre-language imaginary. Any "I" she speaks is constructed for her by the male principle, just as female is defined not from itself but as male's other.

Lesbian sexuality generates an identity which is not defined by an opposition to maleness. Thus the lesbian remains outside the male-female polarity. She demonstrates a radical possibility for attaining subjectivity through activity which asserts personal meaning and is understood via similarities as much as differences.

Lesbian "deviance" refutes the all-encompassing "natural" power of the male-female opposition as defining principle. Lesbianism demands a new operation of subjectivity in which active desires, pleasures, and other specific declarations of identity, construct a field of multiple entry points. Within this new operation, a heterosexual woman's active sexuality would not be consumed but empowered. Rather than enforcing two "true" sexes, which allow one (male) subject, we must recognize the power of individual activities, in this case sexualities, to assert subjectivity.

I am not merely suggesting that sexual preference be added to anatomy as a determiner of the subject position, but rather that individual activity and assertion can construct subjectivity. Thus, for example, the experience and assertion of one's ethnic or racial identity would be acknowledged as an authentic subject position.

The proposal that lesbians might abandon the female "position" without adopting maleness uncovers an historical investment in and enforcement of a system of two sexes as well as two genders. This consistent maintenance of an historical construct explains the overloaded significance of the question, "Where is the man?" in response to relations between women and/or lesbians. It raises the ultimate importance of investigating lesbian aesthetics.

NOTES

I would like to thank Nancy Finke and Ken Kirby for their helpful suggestions and assistance during the editing of this article.

1. See Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), especially the "Desire in Narrative" chapter.

2. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975), p. 17.

3. Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by DUEL IN THE SUN," *Framework* 15/16/17 (Summer 1981), p. 13.

4. Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator," *Screen* 23, nos. 3-4 (September-October 1982), p. 78. Also see Doane's "Masquerade Reconsidered: Further Thoughts on the Female Spectator," *Discourse* 11, No. 1 (Fall-Winter 1988-89).

5. Ibid. p. 80.

6. Ibid. p. 87.

7. Such an investigation was called for over a decade ago by Michelle Citron, Julia Lesage, Judith Mayne, B. Ruby Rich, and Anna Maria Taylor. See their discussion in "Women and Film: Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics," *New German Critique* 13 (Winter 1978), pp. 88-91.

8. See Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca, "Pre-text and Text in GENTLEMEN PREFER BLONDES," *Film Reader* 5 (Evanston, IL: Film Division/School of

Speech, Northwestern University, 1982), pp. 13-23. Arbuthnot and Seneca describe the pleasure afforded the lesbian viewer by such framing-together of women characters.

9. Michel Foucault, "Introduction," *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDougall (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), pp. vii-viii

[To top](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)

Women in Hollywood musicals Pulling the plug on Lina Lamont

by Martin Roth

from *Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, pp. 59-65

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1990, 2006

In the musical film *SINGIN' IN THE RAIN* the movie queen, Lina Lamont (Jean Hagen) stands as the only center of negative energy. Three men and a woman oppose her: Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly), a matinee idol; Cosmo Brown (Donald O'Connor), a studio musician; R. F. Simpson (Millard Mitchell), the studio boss; and Kathy Seldon (Debbie Reynolds), an ingenue. In the film, these sympathetic characters all have a positive relationship to song and dance, and, as performers, they dissolve back into the actors who play them. Even Mitchell is allowed to participate in a communal dance step with Kelly and O'Connor as they prepare to pull the curtain on Lina Lamont. That curtain's rising will show that Lina is singing without sound. Before, Lina had a habit of calling things "dumb" — she even asks the men around her if they think that she is dumb — and she is now about to be shut up for good. She will be exposed as a dummy whose voice is produced elsewhere. Even O'Connor will stand in briefly as the source of Lina's song, before she finally gets the point and runs off the stage in humiliation.

The filmmakers clearly want me to read Lina as a stupid, egotistical, greedy, and vindictive woman. Yet, if I detach myself from that reading, I find Lina's behavior in the film abstractly commendable. The speech she makes before she takes the stage for the last time even sounds like a feminist declaration of independence. She announces her intention to take back the voice that the company has stolen from her in return for her stardom:

"I'm not so sure! You're the big Mr. Producer — always running things. Running me. Well, from now on, as far as I'm concerned, I'm running things...A speech? Yeah, everybody's always making speeches for me. Well, tonight, I'm gonna do my own talking. I'm gonna make the speech."^[1][\[open notes in new window\]](#)

The sequence is fulfilled in a way common to Western narrative: that is almost the last thing she says.

I want to read Lina against the men (mainly) who made her; the other star that I will consider at some length is Ginger Rogers. Together, the systems of female economy in *SINGIN' IN THE RAIN* and *SHALL WE DANCE* begin to spell out a paradigm: they identify the female star of song and dance as the product of male

appropriation and substitution. Feminist film critics have written frequently about male appropriation.[2] I reiterate that thesis here even though (or because) musicals manipulate the female star so shamelessly and in an openly fantastic way. Musicals trade in fictions that have a narcissistic extravagance. Yet those fictions depend upon a ground of rigid, conventional sexual difference. The female star is neither more beautiful nor more talented than the women I can meet and get to know off-screen; but she is so inexchangeably feminine. *SINGIN' IN THE RAIN* and *SHALL WE DANCE* express the shape of that fixity.

In *SINGIN' IN THE RAIN* and *SHALL WE DANCE* the distance between the female star and woman is maintained by collusion and theft — in the case of Lina Lamont, the theft of her voice; in the case of Ginger Rogers, the theft of her body. Such images seem crucial. Ostensibly, the musical project is devoted to empowering its stars in both voice and body, to presenting us with images of transcendental wholeness. Yet even when sexual difference breaks down or flies apart — as it must, under the pressure of its rigidity — the dominant fictions of male control and desire do not seem eroded but crazily reinforced.

This pairing of Lina and Ginger is particularly neat: the two images of theft align themselves with the satisfaction of Lacan's "pulsion invocante" ("the call to response") and Freud's voyeuristic and fetishistic scopophilia — the perceptual passions that constitute cinematic pleasure, the passion to bind hearing and seeing. [3] Both forms of theft originated in what I take to be the radical story of the female celebrity, George Du Maurier's *Trilby*, in which a charlatan uses hypnosis to fill a beautiful young girl's body and voice with his brilliant performance energy. Without his appropriation and immanence, *Trilby* cannot perform; when he dies, her talent disappears. The story's fame also depended on gender substitution in its title, on its being made into a movie entitled *SVENGALI*.

SINGIN' IN THE RAIN AND THE SOUND OF MUSIC

Lina Lamont has only one real problem — she is untalented. This sin of performance becomes identified with her voice. Two male critics explain this with relish: She has "a Brooklyn accent [that]...could stop a beer truck at fifty yards," says John Mariani; while, according to Clive Hirschhorn, she "cannot string two syllables together without sounding like a grinding gear." [4] Lina suffers from this kind of exclusion twice: she doesn't talk like a lady and she doesn't sing like a star. Her voice promises no ecstasy; it cannot be desired as a fetish. In fact, not only does Lina have a voice unacceptable for a musical — it is not even human. In an early version of the screenplay, the script makes an allusion to Lina's future career, that she "is currently appearing in *JUNGLE PRINCESS*, in which she doesn't say a word — just grunts." [5]

What is wrong with Lina's voice is that it is real: it possesses a noisy grain; it expresses the work of its production. Her voice comes from the audience, from the urban working class: When Lina first uses her own voice at the premiere of *THE DUELING CAVALIER*, she is answered by the voice of a heckler who speaks with the same accent. Lina's voice does not come as the product of money, time, and training; it will never reflect the music of our fantasies. It even resists the efforts of a vocal coach who urges Lina to speak in "rrround tones" and who stretches the joke by trying to give her fruity British pronunciation.

The film does not seem to notice that Gene Kelly also comes out of his elocution lessons with the voice he had before he went in. The film implies that Kelly's voice was already a commodity, and as such transcended the logic of narrative. Lina, on the other hand, is made fully subject to the narrative, which deals with a crisis in entertainment values (the transition from silent films to sound) and which criminalizes Lina's strong and consistent self-presentation.

The value of Kelly's voice may be one of the reasons why the film was made, but Lina's voice also predates the film and also derives from the voice of a star. Lina's voice has a history:

"For the key role of Lina Lamont...the ideal choice at the time the script was being written was Judy Holliday. The character in the script was modelled on the rendition of the classic dumb blonde that she had experimented with while working with Comden and Green in *The Revuers* years before and developed in the stage version of *Born Yesterday* (1946). But by the time SINGIN' IN THE RAIN was being cast, Judy Holliday had become a major film star following the release of the movie version of BORN YESTERDAY in late 1950." [6]

"Jean Hagen was tested for the part of Lina Lamont because she had played Billie Dawn, the leading character in the play *Born Yesterday*, on the road. Gene Kelly, as director of SINGIN' IN THE RAIN, "just told Jean [Hagen] to act Judy playing Billie Dawn in *Born Yesterday* — and it was easy after that." [7]

The voice I am writing about, then, is unacceptably alien to "the show" yet outside the film still stands as a sacred relic in the world of entertainment. In SINGIN' IN THE RAIN, expelling and repudiating the Lamont voice becomes the condition for making entertainment, for making the show's magic. But this same voice was acclaimed in *Born Yesterday* and made it a hit; the same voice, in point of fact, launched the movie career of Debbie Reynolds. Reynolds had been signed by Warners after winning a Miss Burbank beauty contest and dropped by that studio shortly afterwards. MGM picked up her contract, and her first appearance for that studio was a cameo role in THREE LITTLE WORDS in which she reproduced an historic image of vocal charm — the acceptably cute version of the lower-class Manhattan accent of Helen Kane, the "Boop-boop-adoo" girl.

Billie Dawn in *Born Yesterday* represents a dumb blonde with a shrill voice. The stage directions describe her as "breathtakingly beautiful and breathtakingly stupid," but she is not stupid. Rather she moves utterly apathetically through a world in which she has no voice. Like Lina, she can also make a pathetic claim to be an entertainer: "I wasn't only in the chorus. In *Anything Goes* I spoke lines." *Born Yesterday*'s script celebrates Billie for what she is and for a new self-awareness that she gains, a self-awareness which, in fact, resembles Lina Lamont's final and only speech. Billie declares,

"All of a sudden I realized what it means. How some people are always giving it and some taking. And it's not fair. So I'm not going to let you anymore. Or *anybody*." [8]

Despite the example of Billie Dawn, we all know, as naive film readers, the horrors of the harsh female voice. At an early age, we know how to read the drilling cackle

of Margaret Hamilton — its most enduring avatar — against the simpering sweetness of Billie Burke. Hamilton plays the grandest of those bad witches that haunt our childhood, and we know that any work of art that encloses such an image is to extinguish that voice and body. THE WIZARD OF OZ expertly accomplished this, as the bad witch melts into a puddle on the floor. In Judy Garland's next film, the Busby Berkeley musical BABES IN ARMS, Margaret Hamilton returns with the same voice, muted perhaps. She clamors against entertainment, trying to prevent vaudevillians' children of from putting on their show; she demands instead that they be sent to a work farm for the good of the community.

Such voices have no right even to exist, or so says Professor Henry Higgins, surely another Svengali-type model for the male producer of the female celebrity. He wrinkles his face in disgust at Liza Doolittle's gutter accents as if they were a bad smell: "A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere — no right to live." [9]

Considering the attitudes expressed by SINGIN' IN THE RAIN's songs, perhaps it is best that Lina not have an acceptable voice and that she not be given any songs to sing. The first song sung by a woman, "All I Do the Whole Day Through," depicts the woman's abject love and dependence upon an absent male:

"All I do the whole day through is dream of you,
With the dawn I still go on, dreaming of you,
You're every thought, you're every thing,
Every song I ever sing:
Summer, winter, autumn and spring."

But even this "feminine attitude" loops crazily back, since a female chorus that includes Debbie Reynolds sings this song at a party, where they perform it quickly and choppily — in low, gum-chewing chorine voices, voices which resemble that of Lina Lamont.

Voice in SINGIN' IN THE RAIN, as in the Hollywood musical generally does not establish a character track or a sound track but is a vocal palimpsest on which many traces touch and overlay in brief substitution. The vocal essence that Lina should have does not exist: in SINGIN' IN THE RAIN voice is very decidedly "written." In the fiction of the film, Debbie Reynolds redeems the studio's investment in Lina by dubbing both Lina's speaking and singing voice as the studio prepares to make its transition to sound. But in the filmic presentation, it seems as if anybody can dub for anybody else. O'Connor dubs for Lina Lamont momentarily; he dubs for Reynolds as he accidentally echoes a particularly resonant line of her earlier dialogue. Reynolds dubs for the villain of THE DUELING CAVALIER, accidentally dubbing for Lina Lamont. In that film-within-a-film, the studio's first sound production, the sound drifts further and further out of synch with the lip movements until, in the rape or conquest scene, the villain's low, "Yes, yes, yes," seems to come out of Lina's mouth, and her shrill, "No, no, no," out of his.

In the production that we don't see, things vary even more. Behind the speaking and singing voice of Lina Lamont stands Debbie Reynolds' voice, yet that, in fact, becomes technologically replaced by Jean Hagen's real speaking voice and Betty Noyes' singing voice. Because Reynolds' own singing voice was so weak, she had to be dubbed as well in the high notes — and the sound of her tap dancing was dubbed

by Gene Kelly.[10]

Early in the film, Gene Kelly himself demonstrates the falsity of voice. Standing at a microphone, he narrates his "biography," a short flashback sequence with music and song. This presentation is doubly false: in the first place, Kelly generates a performance that we are supposed to see and hear through. When asked to "tell...how it all happened," Kelly says, "Oh, Dora, not in front of all these people," in a voice that stimulates the crowd to scream, "Yes!" Kelly also falsifies his life — all in fun, of course — in a speech that invokes the values of family, dignity, and high art to mask a life of delinquency, squalor, and hardship.

However one weighs this, the first "movie" in a film about movies has as its structural message that the Hollywood voice lies. That the Hollywood image lies becomes the message of a later structural inversion of this sequence — a love scene in a silent film played by Kelly and Lina Lamont; it's the third dramatic performance with a disjunctive soundtrack in the film. As they gaze love at one another for the camera, they quietly threaten and curse each other. As they rise for a passionate kiss, Kelly says, "I'd like to break every bone in your body," and Lina replies, "You and who else — you big lummo!"

Debbie Reynolds represents everything that Lina Lamont is not. She is male-identified, completely dependent emotionally on men's action and moods. She is as soft and pliant and girlish as Kelly sings of her:

"Nature patterned you and when she was done,
You were all the sweet things rolled up in one."

Visually, the film presents her as an adolescent girl, while Lina looks like a sexually mature woman; Reynolds wears high necklines throughout the film, while that eighteenth-century gown of Lina's is cut lower than Jane Russell's western blouse in *THE OUTLAW*. Reynolds seems like a girl doll, and at the party following the premiere, she pops out of a cake as a present for Gene Kelly. Unlike Lina, who matches Kelly as an economic equal, Reynolds provides him the pleasure of a subordinate for whom he can do things.

An opening sequence depicting misunderstandings between Kelly and Reynolds (after which she falls submissively in love with him) tells the story of her sexual alienation and bondage to the male star. At the party, Kelly discovers that Reynolds, who pops out of the cake, does not work as a stage actress as she had pretended, and he subjects her to an aggressive train of humiliations. She works as a performer like himself, yet he follows her through her act, mocking and heckling her: he holds her to pull her out of her act. Only at the end of the sequence does the film allow her a brief flash of anger, and the gesture the film gives her to get back at Kelly screams "silent film": she grabs a cake from a tray and prepares to push it in his face. But Kelly ducks and the cake hits Lina instead.

This deflection and displacement is performed by the script as well. Kelly, the dancer and actor, weaves and bobs and ducks, so that Reynolds and Lina become placed as adversaries. The story both registers and forgets the fact that Lina Lamont was originally the established star and that Kelly made it in association with her. The plot shows Lina as a star when Kelly first tried to break into the movies; he got his first role as replacing (dubbing for) the actor, the villain, who

clutched her against her will, threatening bodily harm or rape. Now, like Svengali, Kelly gets top billing — in fact the only billing, since the films Kelly and Lina make have titles that point only to him and his erotic adventures: *THE ROYAL RASCAL*, *THE DUELLING CAVALIER*, *THE DANCING CAVALIER*. The story both registers and forgets the fact that Kelly is also Lina's rejected lover.

SHALL WE DANCE AND BODY LANGUAGE

We first see Ginger Rogers after the curtain has fallen on the final performance of her show. She and a "Latin" co-star remain frozen in a stage embrace, and then her dancing partner decides to go after a real kiss: "You are so beautiful when you are angry. Pardon, mademoiselle, I cannot help what I cannot help." Rogers wrestles with him and pushes him into a nearby fountain. In a stormy scene with her producer, Rogers says that she feels humiliated — in a later scene, she tells him she is "tired of being pawed" — that she will quit show business, that she has summoned her sexually anaesthetic, stockbroker beau and accepted his marriage proposal. She wants to leave show business because dancing with a man (or being a dancer) makes him believe he has access to her body. She turns on the men around her and shouts, "Go home, all of you."

Rogers' rejection of the male as an aggressor must give way to romance, however, to clear a path for the musical. She felt humiliated, she says, because she had to dance with a man she did not love. She feels an intensely personal equation between the show and courtship. But that is also the conventional equation of the musical itself, where song and dance can always demonstrate true love. Given this logic, the film should have as its project to measure the distance between Rogers' first partner and her ultimate dancing partner — a sleek-haired, effeminately graceful ballroom dancer, on the one hand, and, on the other, the fabulous Fred Astaire. Unfortunately, the two partners look and act remarkably like doubles. In place of this, we expect the film to at least chart the sequence that shows Ginger Rogers falling in love with Astaire and thereby becoming available to dance with him.

The film does no such thing. It will of course bring Astaire and Rogers together somehow as a fulfillment of their billing. Astaire begins to court Rogers from the moment he first sees her picture; like the Latin lover, he pursues her aggressively. His courtship becomes thwarted by a number of narrative circumstances, but this all seems redundant because of Rogers' presentation. Nothing Astaire can do — and almost all of his energy is devoted to getting and holding her attention — makes an impression on this woman. She does not seem to be in a state where a different man will make a difference. Her mouth generally remains fixed in a frown; she performs silent burns. (On the other hand, it is hard to catch Astaire at a moment when he is not smiling.) She may pause, even seem to smile and assent momentarily, but she soon drifts off into her own private space.

Fortunately for the film, another Ginger Rogers waits in the closet, a life-sized, uncanny replica of the star left over from an old production number, and this Ginger Rogers can appear rampantly sexual. The dummy is carried into Astaire's bedroom at night and posed hovering over his bed. The scene is then photographed and given to the papers. We can read this newsphoto as Astaire sleeping peacefully after lovemaking while Rogers, still excited, seems to sit there wanting more.

The plot's surface logic claims that this trick of using the dummy for publicity photos is motivated by affection, that Astaire wants to prevent Rogers from making a bad mistake and leaving the entertainment world. But that device of the dummy symbolizes how the narrative manipulates her body in other ways. The scene described above is preceded and followed by narrative sequences in which Rogers must be manipulated into dancing. She does not dance voluntarily until the very end of the film and then under bizarre circumstances.

The final show in *SHALL WE DANCE* is woven around the motif of the theft of and substitution for Rogers' dancing body. Astaire appears with a musical comedy chorus all of whom carry casts of Ginger Rogers' face.^[12] Ginger Rogers is lured into this number along a devious path. She comes to the nightclub in order to serve Fred Astaire with divorce papers. When Jerome Cowan tells her of Astaire's cry "from the heart" — that if he can't dance with her, he will dance with images of her — her face softens and she smiles fully for the first time in the film.

The camera returns to the production number, and as it pans through the line of blondes holding masks near their faces, we see that one of them is Ginger Rogers twice over. The chorus girls move back into their niches and Astaire dances through them, pulling each one out, unmasking her, moving along the circle, until, almost without registering it, he has confronted his destined dancing partner. Ginger Rogers is thus made to join the show as a chorus girl whom Astaire elevates to become his partner, although originally she was the musical comedy star. The ending here corresponds to *SINGIN' IN THE RAIN*'s move from Lina Lamont to Debbie Reynolds.

Ginger Rogers joins the dance holding an entertainment image of her face up to her real face — a fulfillment of her initial framing in the film. At the beginning, *SHALL WE DANCE* makes two preliminary passes before we finally see Ginger Rogers. Her first appearance comes through her image on a billboard in front of the theater; we see her through her glossy life-sized photo — standing out in the street to lure passersby to the entertainment bliss that awaits within.

Critics have isolated and praised the second image, but they do not mention its pornography. Ginger Rogers appears in the pages of a flip-through picture book which Astaire, who has not even met Rogers yet, shows and gives to Edward Everett Horton. It delights Horton. As Horton flips the pages, Rogers performs the dance. Horton can make Rogers dance forward and backwards; he can make her stop and start. It is an image of male control of the female body, of the male as the producer of the dance. The song, "They Can't Take That Away From Me" with its inventory of female parts — "wear your hat," "sip your tea," "sing off-key," etc. — correspondingly belongs in such a film that acts out fetishization.

Similar images of the appropriation and control of the female body occur in other Astaire-Rogers musicals. The first production number in *THE GAY DIVORCEE* involves a revolving wheel of chorus girls. They stand behind a circular glass counter like shopgirls demonstrating some new item of fashionable luxury. What they are demonstrating are their bodies. As if to deny that they are demonstrating their bodies or that they have bodies, they all have miniature gauze tutus around their hands. The dance, the number itself, becomes their dancing hands and fingers as the rest of the set remains blacked out. We cut to a table in the nightclub where two other hands, those of Astaire and Horton, are performing *their* female dance.

Horton says he can't do his dance properly; his fingers have "housemaid's knee." He uses a phrase like "Adam's rib" to remind us that women have always been subject to male metonymy. In the big production number at the end of the film, "The Continental," one of the spectacular images is of members of the female chorus standing in a revolving door which exhibits them as it turns — a second image of women attached to a display mechanism.

Fred Astaire dances the culminating "Change Partners" number in CAREFREE with a hypnotized Ginger Rogers. In that film, he plays a psychoanalyst and she a patient under the influence of a mistaken program he gave her not to love him, to think of him as a beast, and to shoot him on sight. The premise of hypnotism makes no difference to the presentation of the dance; if anything, it makes the dance even lovelier. The female dancer can perform awake or asleep. Astaire begins by freezing her with a hand pass; he moves his hands slightly and she sways. He dances both his own and her dance: he makes her stop, go, lift her arms, etc.. In THE PIRATE as well, Judy Garland can enter the world of the musical only after she has been hypnotized by Gene Kelly.

Readers of Hollywood musicals have found fault with SHALL WE DANCE for its perfunctory rendering of Astaire's desire to merge ballet and jazz. The final show, which should embody this secondary marriage, divides its time and spectacle between the two but not its energy. According to Arlene Croce, the ballet sequence is a

"nightmare...Harriet Hctor (the lead dancer), can be taken for nothing human. She was a contortionist whose specialty, a horseshoe backbend on points, was already known to movie audiences. (In this position she would kick herself in the head)."[13]

Within the film's presentational logic, it is a perfect finale. The female star collaborates in her own dismemberment, and she caps her act by kicking herself in the head. (When Gene Kelly rejects the advances of Lina Lamont, however, she kicks him in the ass — but then Lina is excluded from the finale).

Another image of the dancing female belongs to the intersection of ballet and musical comedy: Moira Shearer's dancing herself to death in THE RED SHOES. That film's success was responsible for the gala ballets in film musicals, like the "Broadway Ballet" number in SINGIN' IN THE RAIN; both are thematically similar. Both are devoted to a compulsion to dance. Kelly identifies his madness through the repetition of the lyric phrase, "Gotta sing, gotta dance."

Impulsive or compulsive dancing is also Fred Astaire's trademark. In TOP HAT, Astaire says to Ginger Rogers, "Every once in a while I suddenly find myself dancing." In the "Shoes With Wings On" number in THE BARKELEYS OF BROADWAY, animated shoes coerce Astaire to dance. And in FINIAN'S RAINBOW he tells Petula Clark that he "can't stop dancing." The point is a simple one: the men become fulfilled by their runaway feet. They are lifted into harmony with the Platonic music that always plays from behind or below the sets of this everyday world. Shearer, on the other hand, ends up depleted, exhausted, ravaged, and finally destroyed by her dancing shoes.

"BROADWAY MELODY" DREAMS OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

SINGIN' IN THE RAIN tells the story of Gene Kelly a second time, in a very different register and on a terrain where sexual difference breaks down, mapping but never really acknowledging its own construction of sexuality. The culminating "show" in SINGIN' IN THE RAIN is a long dance and ballet sequence — "The Broadway Melody" and "The Broadway Ballet" — folded into the film as a projected number for the musical remake of THE DUELING CAVALIER.

The sequence has two fictions — the creation of the male star and the conquest of Broadway — and it bursts with color, music, and activity. It seems to have a central importance but nevertheless, it remains framed by a series of marginalizing gestures; it literally has no place in the film. And it represents an alternate sexual series: other positions taken by Hollywood in its own past, usually in a comic or surreal mode; the positions of minor characters like Donald O'Connor or Edward Everett Horton; the positions of the stars in their own minor keys. In it, the Kelly figure desires but does not get the girl, and he has to find solace in his commitment to entertainment. Singing and dancing here stand as a consolation prize (although this heresy, the disjuncture of the values of love and entertainment, will not enter musicals fully until A STAR IS BORN, two years later).

In this dance's story, a "feminine" Kelly has a desperate emotional dependency on a strong woman who does not speak and who exploits and rejects him. The woman, Cyd Charisse, presents an image that seems hard and unfeminine because overly feminized. A woman enacts revenge who is as fixed in her feminization as multiple layers of personal, spectacular, and narrative cosmetics can make her. She is also fixed in her identification with and narrative dependence upon an intensely male image, the gangster who lets her go for the length of the sequence and then pulls her back in. Her make-up evokes the predatory females of the silent screen, Pola Negri or Louise Brooks. Like Ann Miller, she has a glossy, over-cosmeticized surface.

At one point in the number, a familiar set of male gestures comes from Charisse as she tosses Kelly's hat away and takes off his glasses, twirls them, and lets them fly — she brings him out sexually. And then she devours him; the most resonant images in this number are the twin images of Charisse staring down at a kneeling Kelly with her leg stretched out across his chest as she balances his Harold Lloyd hat on the end of her foot; and that same leg stretched upwards with the hat perched on top. It is a sequence of sexual conquest that is both phallic and vaginal. She has not only skeletalized and replaced Kelly; she has also absorbed and ingested him.

The "second-man" position in both of these films is, as is usual, an affectionate but bracketed homosexual ideal. In SINGIN' IN THE RAIN, O'Connor is the third celebrity to arrive at the premiere, following two couples. He arrives alone in a snazzy white roadster; his broad smile tells us that he is unaware of anything peculiar in this; and the film moves, without punctuation, to the arrival of another couple. Yet his solitude is telling: the film does not try to pair him up with anyone in a realm where success seems measured both by applause and by love.

In a publicity still from the "Good Morning" number, Kelly and O'Connor lean forward, hands on their knees, gazing into one another's eyes. Reynolds seems shut out, repeating the same gesture in an unidentified and disconnected space.

O'Connor always accompanies Kelly, is always available to him. In two numbers, "Fit as a Fiddle" and "Moses Supposes," through the passes of the dance, the two men are depicted in startling intimacy: Kelly sits on O'Connor's lap, O'Connor rides Kelly, etc. One of O'Connor's functions, more elaborated by Edward Everett Horton, O'Connor's counterpart in *SHALL WE DANCE*, is to denigrate women, to express mindlessly and instinctively a misogyny which the narrative continually reinforces. In the "Make 'Em Laugh" number, O'Connor beats off and then strangles a "forward" love partner, who is also a dummy.

Ultimately, gender reversal becomes the secret of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers' wonderful fit; we read their gender in waves that reverse themselves: their identity as male and female, their appearance as female and male, their semantic content as male and female, their expressions as female and male, and so on up and down the line. Currently, the construction of sexuality seems overtly to preoccupy "Hollywood" film plots — in movies like *TOOTSIE* or *COME BACK TO THE FIVE AND DIME*, *JIMMY DEAN*, *JIMMY DEAN* — as if film has suddenly registered with conscious delight the game that actually constitutes the secret history of its appeal — as well as its most scandalous ruse.

NOTES

1. Betty Comden and Adolph Green, *SINGIN' IN THE RAIN* (New York: The Viking Press, 1972), p. 36.
2. See, for example, Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984); Mary Anne Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," *Screen*, 23 (Fall, 1982); Lucy Fischer, "The Image of Woman as Image: The Optical Politics of *DAMES*," in *Genre: The Musical*, ed. Rick Altman (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980); Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982); and Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Women and the Cinema*, ed. Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977).
3. See Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; 1977), p. 58. Lina may also be read to signify the silencing of the female spectator; see Doane, p. 77.
4. John Mariani, "Come on with the Rain," *Film Comment*, 14 (1978), p. 8, and Clive Hirschhorn, *Gene Kelly* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1974), p. 208.
5. Rudy Behlmer, *America's Favorite Movies* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1973), p. 258.
6. Behlmer, p. 260.
7. Hirschhorn, p.211.
8. Garson Kanin, "BORN YESTERDAY," *Comedy Tonight*, ed. Mary Sherwin (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1977), pp. 507, 523, and 581.
9. George Bernard Shaw, "Pygmalion," *Six Plays* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company), p. 206.

10. Behlrner, p. 267 and Mariani, p. 9.

11. Mariani, p. 10.

12. This is a descriptive and not an affective statement, for Lina who is made up to be sexual does not hold our erotic fantasy, while Reynolds, who is not, does. While Laura Mulvey can write, with general force, that "in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance ceded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" [p. 418], the extreme edge of feminization is far radical in its effects. Witness the absolute contrast between the images of Lina and Cyd Charisse in this film.

12. Compare Lucy Fischer on Busby Berkeley's DAMES: "Thus what emerges in DAMES is yet another sense of woman as image. For it is not so much the physical feminine presence that is celebrated in DAMES as her synthetic cinematic image. And ultimately the privileged status of that image and its mode of presentation propose it as a virtual substitute for woman herself" (83-84).

13. *The Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers Book* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), p. 122.

The IBM tramp

by Stephen Papson

from *Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, pp. 66-72

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1990, 2006

"Now this essential gap between the arts and the order of the day, kept open in the artistic alienation, is progressively closed by the advancing technological society. And with its closing, the Great Refusal is in turn refused; the 'other dimension' is absorbed into the prevailing state of affairs. The works of alienation are themselves incorporated into this society and circulate as part and parcel of the equipment which adorns and psychoanalyzes the prevailing state of affairs. Thus they become commercials — they sell, comfort, or excite."

— Herbert Marcuse[1][[open notes in new window](#)]

In 1981, IBM hired the advertising agency, Lord, Geller, Federico, and Einstein, to construct a campaign to market its microcomputer. The agency chose Charles Chaplin's tramp as spokesperson. IBM bought the rights to the tramp from Bubbles, the Chaplin family organization. The agency hired Bill Scudder, a mime, to imitate Chaplin's tramp. In November, 1981, the agency released its first commercial entitled "The House." In it, a tramp confronts a large foreboding white box. A door appears but then snaps shut. As the narrator talks about the history of the computer, the box shrinks in size. The tramp takes out the IBM personal computer, scans a manual, and begins to work on the computer.

This commercial was a success. Not only did it win numerous advertising awards, but also it made the desired impact on the public. IBM decided to continue with the Chaplin mime campaign. The agency created both a series of commercials and print ads not only using the tramp but also numerous references from Chaplin films. The campaign was organized around the theme "Keeping up with Modern Times."

Advertising Age noted that "in developing an advertising strategy, IBM knew it wanted to break down widespread public fear of the computer, demonstrate its essential simplicity of operation and popularize its many applications." [2]

Tom Mabley, senior vice-president and creative director of the agency, stated,

"We knew we wanted a simple, friendly person who should represent Everyman...Charlie Chaplin's little tramp character is lovable to all kinds of people at all ages. He's vulnerable, but he's clever. He has incredible problems, but he always finds a solution. He's an individual."

He's Everyman."[3]

But what does Chaplin's tramp have to do with a computer? What meanings arise when a tramp, a computer, and a multinational corporation share the same space in a commercial? And what happens when the tramp is taken out of Chaplin's narrative and placed into IBM's narrative?

It is the contention of this essay that IBM's recontextualization of Chaplin's character not only exemplifies Marcuse's notion of one dimensionality in which the critical elements of artistic production are flattened; but it also represents the transformation of culture from a form of collective memory — which serves as a backdrop or anchor to everyday life, Walter Benjamin's *Erfahrung* — to a form of spectacle or simulacrum in which elements in culture are no longer rooted in events and in which meanings are constantly shifting.

FROM CHAPLIN'S TRAMP TO IBM'S MIME

"Charlie. Everyman. Charlie Chaplin. And the minute you saw it, you knew it was right. There was no research because it was a confidential assignment. You couldn't research anything and not break confidentiality. If you apply what you know about that big company or any big company. They'd say you're taking a guy who was kicked out of the country, who didn't pay his taxes, who was married 14 times. He was a Commie. And you're saying this person should be a spokesperson for our company, our staid conservative big company.

— Richard Lord, Chairman and CEO of the Advertising Agency[4]

Chaplin's work spanned 50 years. His characterizations ranged from his work in the violent Sennet slapstick comedies to his creation of the desperate Monsieur Verdoux. Likewise, as Lord noted, his relationship with the public was even more volatile.[5] And yet, it is his characterization of a tramp that overwhelms his other work, his social philosophy, and his personal life which was transformed by a sensational press into public controversy.

While Lord discusses the negatives associated with Chaplin's off-screen life and his fear that these negatives might become associated with IBM, it is the critical elements of Chaplin's comedy which has the potential to upset the image which IBM wishes to project about itself. The tramp is a critical character laden with oppositions and contradictions. He is a poor man dressed up in the custom of a rich man — a custom which does not quite fit. He is a member of the urban ghetto who often finds himself in upper class social settings.

Most important, he is a creation of the social disruptions which Chaplin personally experienced. The disruptions themselves were the consequence of the expansion of industrial capitalism. And yet, Chaplin's tramp is not remembered as a representative of a particular period of U.S. history but as an "Everyman." And as an "Everyman," the tramp expresses affect through gesture, but without a sociohistorical context. The character of the tramp existing in a specific socio-historical reality is denied, and replaced by a character expressing universal human qualities. The reduction of Chaplin's tramp to a universal character who exists outside of history is a form of bourgeois myth-making.[6]

As Barthes noted, myth transforms history into nature.

"What the world supplies to myth, is an historical reality, defined, even if this goes back quite a while, by the way in which men have produced or used it; and what myth gives in return is a natural image of reality. And just as bourgeois ideology is defined by the abandonment of the name "bourgeois," myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it things lose the meaning that they were once made." [7]

The transformation of Chaplin's tramp into an Everyman takes place through a series of separations. The characterization of the tramp is separated from Chaplin's personal life, from his social philosophy, from the narratives in which the character acted meaningfully, and from the historical period to which those narratives refer. The consequence is the depoliticization of the tramp's actions.

Because images and reproductions are continually reexperienced in alien contexts, IBM is also able to recontextualize the character for its purposes. IBM's mime uses the gestures, expressions, costuming, and props — all the signifiers of the tramp — but leaves behind the reference system in which signification took place. By recontextualizing the tramp in its own narrative which supports computer technology and itself, IBM leaves the negative elements behind. Ironically, IBM not only chose Chaplin's tramp but uses references from Chaplin's most critical films MODERN TIMES and THE KID.

FROM CHAOS TO ORDER

"The Bakery" and "The Hats" commercial place the IBM's PC in a small business context. These two commercials are organized around the phrase "Keeping Up with Modern Times." They are structurally and thematically similar.

"The Bakery" is a 30-second commercial in which the tramp is working on a conveyor belt. He is putting icing on cakes, and the cakes into boxes. The conveyor speeds up and the cakes no longer fit into the boxes causing cakes to begin crashing on the floor. A circular wipe ends the scene. In the following scene, the tramp is in an office reading a manual, and running IBM's PC. He puts his feet up on the desk. Order is restored. In the final scene of the narrative, he is in the bakery receiving a kiss from a female customer as he gives her a cake with a rose on it. There is also an employee in the background. The final shot of the commercial is a five-second shot of IBM's PC.

The narration is provided by a friendly male voice. He states:

"When you own a small business profits can get squeezed when inventory doesn't match up with production. What you need is a tool for modern times, the IBM PC computer. Not only will it help you plan ahead. It will balance your books and give you more time to make dough. And the cost? That's the icing on the cake. Your own IBM Personal Computer. Try it at a store near you."

The pleasure of watching the commercial comes from the interplay of the narrator's words and the mime's gestures. Phrases such as, "Profits can get

squeezed," "More time to make dough," "And the cost? That's the icing on the cake," are matched with the appropriate images. The mime thus acts out IBM's text.

The commercial appears to be based on two Chaplin films: DOUGH AND DYNAMITE (1914) and MODERN TIMES (1936). In DOUGH AND DYNAMITE, the tramp works in a bakery. The comedy is slapstick.

The reference to MODERN TIMES is specifically to the assembly line sequence which speeds up to the point that the workers can no longer keep up with it. One difference is that the assembly line in MODERN TIMES is controlled by the whim of the President of the company. The workers are powerless in this particular setting. In the commercial, it is the small businessman's inability to control production which causes the breakdown. Social criticism is muted.

This commercial uses the codes of early U.S. comedy to create an atmosphere of nostalgia. The commercial was shot at 15 frames per second rather than the standard 24 fps. Silent film was actually shot at 18 fps. It also uses radical editing devices such as irises and circular wipes associated with this period.

The background musical score is paced to the movement of the assembly line. It quickens to a frantic pace as the whole scene breaks down. When the computer appears and order is restored, it breaks into a waltz. This rhythm is reinforced by the camera's movements.

"The Hats" commercial uses the same format. The tramp picks up a newspaper, walks into his house, turns over a sign which states, "Hat of the Month Club." But then as he enters the house, he steps into a box, a desk drawer shoots out, he crashes into a shelf of hats, and he drops a stack of hats. A mailman enters giving him IBM material picturing the PC.

In the next scene, he is working on the computer and order is restored. The screen shows a graph while the narrator comments, "Use the IBM computer to forecast growth." The tramp now surveys a line of workers carrying hats. The mailman appears delivering more orders. He nods approvingly. The tramp holds and pets a dog who is wearing a feathered headpiece.

Like "The Bakery," the music builds to a frantic pace, and then changes to a waltz when the computer appears. Also, the shots in the first half of the commercial are one-half as long as those in the second half. The commercial is shot at 15 fps and also uses an iris and circular wipe.

Both commercials present a scenario in which business growth leads to chaos. This is signified by both the content of the narrative and the commercial's rhythm (internal movement, montage, background music score). The world of chaos is separated from the world of order by the purchase of a PC and a radical editing device. The computer both restores order and leads to continued, controlled growth. Also, personal prestige is gained by making the decision to buy IBM's PC.

These commercials suggest that computer technology can control those economic forces which disrupt business. They also suggest that if your life is in a state of disorder or at least is experienced as such, a computer can restore normalcy. This

theme of restoring order to a chaotic world is central to the campaign and appears in "The Roller Skates" PC commercial and "The Ducks" software commercial.

RECONTEXTUALIZATION FROM CRITICISM TO AFFIRMATION

There are 13 shots in the 60 second "Roller Skates" commercial. In it, the tramp is manager of a roller skate warehouse, Distribution Branch #27. He enters the warehouse, checks the workers, blows a whistle, and movement begins. The tramp receives a phone call from his boss who appears in a circular mortise. He apparently wants the work speeded up. The workers are skating frantically, just missing each other. The tramp steps down from his office and is swept into the chaos. He falls onto a conveyor belt, which carries him into a delivery truck, and he is hauled away. The truck is irised out. The male narrator states,

"In this rapidly changing world even the brightest and best manager in the country may need more than a loyal staff to run a smooth operation. For when headquarters calls and pressure builds and it becomes hard to keep things rolling without running into mixups, losing control of the operation and falling behind."

The second half of the commercial opens with the tramp in his office typing at the PC's keyboard. As the workers now skate in choreographed harmony to a waltz, the camera dollies back showing the warehouse operating smoothly. Again, the tramp's boss appears but now is nodding approvingly.

The next scene takes place in front of the warehouse. The tramp receives an award from his boss while a female worker looks on. In the last shot, the tramp skates in slow motion through the misty atmosphere of the warehouse with IBM's PC in the foreground. During the second half of the commercial the narrator states,

"For rapid improvement a manager could use a tool for Modern Times. The IBM personal computer. For smoother scheduling, better planning, and greater productivity. It can help a manager excel and become a big wheel in the company. The IBM Personal Computer, see it at a store near you."

This commercial not only uses the tramp but makes numerous direct references to MODERN TIMES. But the references are inverted. Criticism is either muted or transformed to affirmation.

MODERN TIMES is a critical piece. When it opened in New York, it was met by protests. It speaks to "man's inhumanity to man." It is a reminder of the pain and suffering caused by the dislocations of modernization. It is a critique of the assembly line, of mechanized work and of the institutions which support it. And it serves as a record of the hostility and resistance of those overwhelmed by industrialization as they chose among mechanized work, theft, hunger, and protest.

In MODERN TIMES the factory is a dehumanized place in which workers are but extensions of the assembly line. The boss of the factory gives commands through a video screen. He continually speeds up the line. In order to increase productivity, the boss even tries an experiment with a feeding machine, an attempt to see if the workers can eat and work simultaneously. Chaplin is used as the test subject. The

machine, however, speeds up and goes out of control, stuffing bolts and nuts, as well as food into Chaplin's mouth. Despite the consequences to workers, the workplace is continually rationalized.

The warehouse in the commercial is designed with gears and mechanical structures to resemble the film *Modern Times*, and like *Modern Times*, the workplace is to be rationalized. The implementation of the computer into the warehouse is used to coordinate the movements of the workers.

The theme of this commercial is constructed around roller skates. Not only is the warehouse a distribution center for roller skates, but the workers wear roller skates. This prop is taken from the department store scene of *Modern Times* in which Chaplin works as a night watchman. In the film, he not only skates along a precipice creating a visual joke (he does fine until the blindfold is removed) but also throughout the store in a celebration of the good life offered by material objects which have been denied to him and the gamin.

Like the film, the use of roller skating as movement not only generates visual interest but also signifies freedom, the freedom of skating, of gliding. What disappears from view is a conception of the loss of autonomy that coordination (control) means. The mime is the centerpiece, not the workers who are mere background. The coordination of the workers serve as evidence to his success.

Relationships in the workplace are also recontextualized. In the film, the president of the company is doing a puzzle, reading comics, and taking pills. When Chaplin takes a cigarette break in the men's room, the president appears on the video screen, and orders him back to work. On the line, there is conflict between workers because they are unable to keep up with the belt, which is directly linked to the president's commands. In the commercial, the workers are referred to as a "loyal staff." The president becomes "headquarters." The conflict on the line, the adversary relationship between employer and workers, has become an organizational problem which can be solved by a computer.

In the film, the tramp is a worker. His loyalties lie with those persons in and out of work, just trying to survive the Depression. When human dignity requires it, he battles with the police and is jailed on several occasions.[8]

In the IBM commercial, the mime no longer represents human dignity. He is IBM's yes man, upwardly mobile with aspirations to be a "big wheel in the company." His goal is personal success which can be achieved by "greater productivity" of his "staff." IBM has transformed Chaplin's tramp into a yuppie.

Advertising uses antagonistic elements by placing them into a different context, narrative, and/or referent system. The new preferred interpretation eliminates negativity.[9] IBM's reference to *Modern Times* denies it as an historical piece and as an art piece. It denies the conflict which it reflected, the artist's presentation of that conflict, and the other dimension to which that conflict continues to speak. As Marcuse noted, when the critical intentions of the artist are reworked to affirm that which was criticized, the transcendent power of art is annihilated.

ENTERING THE FAMILY: INTRODUCING PC JR

In February, 1984, IBM entered the home computer market. Due to the success of its Chaplin mime campaign. In two years, IBM went from zero to an over 40% of the personal computer market. IBM decided to use the Chaplin mime as spokesperson for PCjr. The agency created two commercials for PCjr. before IBM discontinued production in 1985.

In the introductory commercial for PCjr., the Chaplin mime pulls a cord and unveils a baby carriage in front of the IBM logo. The tramp rolls the baby carriage into the living room, takes PCjr. Out of the carriage, demonstrates it, and wheels the carriage back in front of the IBM logo which grows larger. The female narrator states,

"IBM introduces PCjr., a bright little addition to the family. Junior comes with bright ideas, a keyboard that doesn't need a cord. You can get easy-to-use software like word processing, games and graphics your kid won't believe, plus a starting price you won't believe. And with easy to add options Junior can grow up real fast. PCjr., new from IBM."

The decor of the living room might be called 1920s traditional minimalism. It consists of a rug, two chairs, a table, a lamp, IBM's rose in a vase, and a television set. The background to this set is white. IBM created an image of the U.S. living room which is cold and barren, organized around the television set, in order to maximize the visual impact of the graphics which appear on the television monitor.

By using the baby carriage, phrases such as "a bright little addition to the family," and "Junior can grow up real fast," and by naming the product "PCjr.," IBM positions PCjr. as a member of the family. In its print ads for PCjr., IBM uses similar phrasing such as, "Bringing Home Baby," "Growing Up With Junior," "See Junior Run," etc.

Is the computer object or subject, personal or impersonal, affective or rational? In *The Second Self*, Sherry Turkle notes that these questions span the range of users from pre schoolers to Artificial Intelligence Researchers.[10] Since PCjr. was designed for the home, IBM's advertising emphasized the subjective "friendly" side.

Ironically, this commercial was a failure. First, by depicting the computer as a new infant and by using a baby carriage and a female narrator's voice, the commercial made the computer appear to be a toy to potential consumers. And with its approximately \$1,000 price, it was too expensive a toy. Secondly, Apple continued with a campaign which depicted PCjr. as an inferior to the Apple IIc Apple's commercial which used a bowler hat and cane stressed that the Apple IIc could run a greater amount of software while the PCjr. could not.

This commercial makes references to two Chaplin films CITY LIGHTS (1931) and THE KID (1923). The reference to CITY LIGHTS is specific. The unveiling device used to introduce PCjr. is the same device used to open CITY LIGHTS. In the film, a dedication to two veiled statues, Peace and Prosperity, is taking place. The dedicators are the elite of the community, but they are speaking jibberish in the microphone.

When the statues are unveiled, the crowd is horrified to discover a tramp asleep on one of the statues. As the crowd expresses outrage, the tramp climbs down but

inadvertently gets stuck on the sword of the other statue. After he disengages himself from the sword, he continues to find himself in compromising positions. Finally, he gets away.

The scene is not just humorous but embedded with social criticism. The statues are entitled Peace and Prosperity, and yet Peace has a sword and Prosperity has a tramp asleep on it. The aristocratic audience is outraged at the tramp who had sought shelter under the veil. The tramp through his gestures continues to anger them. The social comedy created by Chaplin becomes a mere introductory device in the commercial. In the commercial the IBM logo is unveiled in order to initiate the narrative.

The reference to THE KID is more general. In the film the tramp finds an abandoned infant whom he also attempts to abandon. Each attempt, however, fails and he finally raises the child himself. The film jumps five years ahead and depicts the relationship between the tramp and the boy through a number of comic sequences. For example, in a money-making scheme, the kid throws rocks through windows. Chaplin shows up moments later and just happens to have a pane of glass. In another sequence, the kid is being picked on by a bully. The two fight. The neighborhood gathers and cheers the boys on. Chaplin arrives and attempts to split them up but then realizes that the kid is winning and joins with the crowd. Then the bully's older brother shows up and tells Chaplin that if the kid beats his brother he's going to beat him.

The most dramatic sequence of the film is an attempt by the county orphanage to take the kid away from the tramp. As the boy is tearfully hauled off in the back of a truck, the tramp battles a policeman, climbs over rooftops, and finally rescues the boy. In the final sequence, the boy's natural mother who had been searching for the child that she had abandoned and who now is a famous actress discovers that the kid is her son. She gets the child back. The tramp who has been looking for the kid is brought to her, and the film ends ambivalently.

This film like much of Chaplin's work is a mixture of pathos and comedy. It is set in an urban slum. The tramp and the kid live in a state of poverty. The neighborhood is violent. The police are defined as a threat to be avoided.

The Introductory PCjr. commercial uses the baby carriage and gestures which refer to the first part of the film. In a second commercial, "The Demonstration," PCjr. is no longer a baby. A boy character modelled after the role played by Jackie Coogan in THE KID is introduced. He becomes the mime's assistant and helps demonstrate the computer.

In the "PCjr. Demonstration" commercial, IBM takes the tramp and the kid out of the urban ghetto and places them in a new context, a 1920s suburban home. The tramp and the kid invite the community into the home for a demonstration of PCjr. The audience is integrated (sex, age, race) but middle class. Through the male narrator's voice, a member of the audience asks, "But what can you do with PCjr.?" The narrator answers the rhetorical question while the tramp and kid demonstrate PCjr.

"For starters, there are programs for learning and everyone can enjoy challenging games, but you can do word processing, communications,

planning, graphics, budgeting, filing, and more, including many powerful business programs that run on the IBM PC. You can do a lot with PCjr. There are over a thousand programs you can use with more being written every day."

The audience applauds approvingly. The narrator's voice has the intonation of circus announcer. The background score is parade music. Using the tramp, the community setting, and the parade music, IBM attaches itself and its computer to the traditional American values — country, community, and family. The purchase of this totem allows one to enter this nostalgic mythical U.S. community.[11] The commercial, however, both denies the urban industrial past depicted in Chaplin's film *THE KID*, and the technological future and the restructuring of social institutions, such as the family.

TOWARD SPECTACLE

Recontextualization of an art object breaks the natural relationship between existence and artistic production. Chaplin's work is an extension of his life experiences. IBM, however, uses the signifiers, custom, gestures, comic devices and settings but leaves behind artistic intention.

The separation of art from its lived context, the everyday life of the artist can be seen in these two examples. First, as noted, the central sequence to *THE KID* is an attempt by the director of the County Orphan Asylum to take the kid from the tramp. The intense emotion displayed in this sequence has a direct relationship to Chaplin's life. He and his brother were placed in a workhouse and then in an orphanage. Chaplin writes of this experience,

"Although at Hanwell we were well looked after, it was a forlorn existence. Sadness was in the air; it was in those country lanes through which we walked, a hundred of us two abreast. How I disliked those walks, and the villages through which we passed, the locals staring at us! We were known as inmates of the "booby hatch," a slang term for workhouse." [12]

The kid in the IBM commercial has no history. He occupies neither space nor time. He is a reference to a Chaplin film which few people in the United States have seen. The reference system to which *THE KID* belonged was anchored in Chaplin's history, to the social conditions of his past and of the 1920s. In the commercial he is only a prop, a floating signifier, to be given new significance by the audience of the commercial but the connection to the artist's existence is broken.

A second example is the use of the rose. In each commercial and print ad, a rose is placed next to the computer. What does this rose signify? From where (whom), does it attain its significance? According to Tom Mabley, creative director of the agency, the rose signifies "individuality and creativity." [13] But why does a rose signify "individuality and creativity"? Because Tom Mabley says so? Is he the reference system? Does the commercial give the rose meaning?

Not really! The narrative of the commercials has no place for the rose. It has nothing to do with the plot, nor with the ensemble of objects which make up the decor. It just exists next to the computer. Does the computer give it significance?

But what is the relationship of a computer and a rose? The significance of the rose flows towards the computer. The significance of the computer does not flow towards the rose. The significance of the rose floats. The reference system through which it is interpreted is dispersed through the audience. While it is encoded to mean "individuality and creativity," it can be decoded any way.[14]

In Chaplin's films, flowers are often used. But unlike the rose in the IBM commercial, they are given significance by the narrative. The significance is further rooted in Chaplin's everyday life. CITY LIGHTS provides the most notable use of flowers. In it, Chaplin falls in love with a blind girl who sells flowers. Flowers are a vehicle through which Chaplin expresses attraction, affection, and concern. They take on meaning in the narrative context.

Also, Chaplin speaks of flowers in his autobiography on two occasions. First, he sold flowers as a way of earning money while living in poverty.

"For weeks I wore crepe on my arm. These insignia of grief became profitable when I went into business on a Saturday afternoon, selling flowers. I had persuaded mother to lend me a shilling, and went to two flower markets and purchased two bundles of narcissus, and after school busied myself making them into penny bundles. All sold, I could make 100 percent profit."

"I would go into saloons looking wistful, and say, 'Narcissus, Miss?' 'Narcissus, Madam?' The women always responded, 'Who is it, son?' And I would lower my voice to a whisper: 'My father,' and they would give me tips."

Second, Chaplin remembers his mother buying flowers.

"On tour she did the shopping and catering, bringing home fruit and delicacies and always a few flowers. For no matter how poor we had been in the past, when shopping on Saturday nights she had always been able to buy a penny worth of wall flowers."[15]

The same transformation is at work here. IBM's use of flowers is a reference to Chaplin's use but without Chaplin's intention. It is an empty reference to be filled in. While the preferred reading is "individuality and creativity," it lends itself to numerous other readings.[16]

Debord and Baudrillard suggest that images and signs form an elaborate network in which meaning is produced everywhere. Significance is decentered and dispersed throughout the network. For Debord, once the natural relation between sign and referent is broken it moves into the realm of spectacle. He notes,

"The images detached from every aspect of life fuse in a common stream in which the unity of this life can no longer be reestablished. Reality considered partially unfolds, in its own general unity, as a pseudo-world apart, an object of mere contemplation. The specialization of images of the world is completed in the world of the autonomous image, where the liar has lied to himself. The spectacle in general, as the concrete inversion of life, is the autonomous movement

of the nonliving."[17]

Baudrillard extends the analysis further,

"The whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum — make believe — not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference."[18]

The images in IBM's commercials are weightless. They have no gravity. Their relationship with other images or to the reality to which they refer is arbitrary. There is Chaplin's life, Chaplin's work, IBM's mime, Apple's use of the hat and cane to refer to IBM. From life to art to spectacle to simulacrum. As Baudrillard suggests elements of this system refer only to other elements in the system. The reality that gave the original images life have slipped into a past which is being rewritten to legitimate a technological future.

CONCLUSION

In his discussion of the recontextualization of art objects, Berger asks, "To whom does the meaning of the art of the past properly belong?"[19] Because of its economic power, IBM is able to appropriate Chaplin's film character not just as a computer salesman but as a spokesperson for IBM. The tramp "stands for" the corporation giving it a positive image to the consumer and differentiating IBM from its competitors who were already established in the market. There is a double irony here: that a tramp can stand for a multinational corporation ranking sixth on The *Fortune* 500 List; and that our most gestural actor can sell a product that eliminates gesture from communication.

But more important, when the past is rewritten to legitimate a technological future, meaning becomes located within the closed boundaries of the system. While the IBM mime uses the gestures, expressions, costume, and props, these stylistic elements are separated from Chaplin's social philosophy, his artistic intentions.

This reconstructed version of the tramp has all the signifiers, but lacks the gestalt, the aura, and Chaplin's presence which was conveyed in the narratives. These were created by Chaplin himself.

The IBM character has no reason for being. Its existence reflects the intent of its new creator, IBM via Lord, Geller. It serves the interests of corporate profit. It is but an image which justifies an advancing technological society. It serves to alleviate the anxieties with the perceived social dislocations such as shifts in power, wealth, and prestige which this technology may cause. By embedding a technology into an ensemble of secure, non-threatening signs such as Chaplin's tramp reconstructed as an Everyman, the perceived social dislocations disappear from view.

NOTES

1. Marcuse, Herbert, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 64.
2. Burstein, Daniel, "Using Yesterday To Sell Tomorrow," *Advertising Age*, 54,

(April 11, 1983), p. M-4.

3. Ibid., p. M-4.

4. Reeves Communications, "Marketing High-Tech," *Ad Video Journal*, No. 5, 1984 (video).

5. David Robinson, *Chaplin: The Mirror of Opinion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1984.

6. For example, the *New York Times* writes in Chaplin's obituary, "His harassed but gallant Everyman was a little tramp, part clown, part social outcast, part philosopher."

7. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (NY: Hill and Wang, 1972), p. 142.

8. Albert Camus argued, "Rebellion, though apparently negative, since it creates nothing, is profoundly positive in that it reveals the part of man which must always be defended." *The Rebel* (NY: Random House, 1954), p.19.

9. Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978), pp. 45-50.

10. Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

11. Advertising creates totemic groups. The computer acts as a totem which allows differentiation. IBM's group is middle-class, integrated, traditional. Apple's group is individualistic, creative, Californian. Williamson notes, "We differentiate ourselves from other people by what we buy...In this process we become identified with the product that differentiates us; and this is a kind of totemism." (op. cit., p. 46)

12. Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (NY: Pocketbooks, 1966), p. 20.

13. *Advertising Age*, op. cit., p. M-4.

14. Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding" in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hubson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis (London: Hutchinson, 1980).

15. Ibid., p. 83.

16. While the preferred decoding of the rose may be "individuality and creativity," I've yet to find anyone who interpreted the meaning of the rose that way.

17. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1977), p.2.

18. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (NY: Semiotext, 1983), pp. 1011.

19. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (NY: Viking, 1977), p. 32.

Power and Paranoia 40s Hollywood

by Tony Williams

from *Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, pp. 73-77

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1990, 2006

Dana Polan, *Power and Paranoia: History, Narrative and The American Cinema 1940-1950*. New York: Columbia University Press 1986.
Hardcover \$27.50.

"Every narrative has its other side, its other scene" (308).

Dana Polan attempts to bridge the problematic gap between film as social history and film as textual form. He does this by examining the richness and denseness of forties U.S. cinema. His work stresses the conflicts and contradictions within a particular historical period and the films belonging to that key period of the "classical Hollywood narrative." [1][[open notes in new window](#)]

To do the book, Polan viewed approximately 700 feature films released between 1940 and 1950. His study is stimulating and well-researched. It demands and deserves re-reading in view of the theoretical, social and historical concepts he refers to. It is definitely a significant academic study, and therein lies its strengths and weaknesses.

Polan's book is one of scholastic merit written in the European-influenced, self-reflexive, tortuous style which many academics use. He acknowledges in the preface "that specific community of scholars producing major work on American [U.S.] cinema in the forties," and thus places his writing within the constraints of academia, notably removed from active political struggle.[2] The prose style reduces the book's potential circulation to a much wider audience.

The book's style of engagement is also predominantly theoretical and makes little reference to popular struggles in the forties and also now against academic authoritarianism. Although Polan cites the complexities of historical interpretation, he shows an Althusserian influence of placing a prime emphasis on theory. The primacy he places on the text over social history and struggle remains a stumbling block in his work.[3] There is much of value in this book and also equally much to dispute.

Polan's comprehensive survey of both "respectable" and "unrespectable" films is

laudable, particularly in terms of JUMP CUT's call for a wider qualitative study of film and television not limited to the accepted classics.[4] The number of the films screened and cited shows Polan has done essential excavation, particularly in view of the restriction of U.S. cinema appearing now on public and cable stations.[5] I would have welcomed an appendix listing the films viewed and selected.

Polan's opening chapter contrasts WWII and postwar cinematic discourses. Polan had presented this idea in an earlier *Velvet Light Trap* article discussing the difference between *PRIDE OF THE MARINES* (1944) and *DARK PASSAGE* (1947). But such distinctions are often not clear-cut. *STRANGER ON THE THIRD FLOOR* (1940) exhibits many of those qualities of postwar alienation and existentialism that Polan finds in later films. That is why a list of the films viewed by Polan would let us check whatever important "missing spaces" exist in his selection.

Polan contrasts WWII sacrificial rhetoric and postwar consumer discourse by looking at the juxtaposition of two narratives contained in *Life Magazine*, August 13th 1945 (34-35). Here he uses Michel Foucault's notion of the spiral or grid to explain how social discourse adapts to new conditions.

"The grid of war and peace, of a successful war, a successful peace, and a successful transition from one to the other, is a grid that exists immediately as a historically specific arrangement of discourse, one version of social practices among others. Even within the space of this discourse, tensions exist...Any particular grid is only one possible system of representations among others; no grid necessarily covers all aspects of any social moment nor does it cover all the modes that it does cover with the same intensity and comprehensiveness" (9-10).

Polan does qualify his use of Foucault particularly in noting (309) that *Discipline and Punish* suggests "a certain refusal by subjects of their prescription within dominant discourses." But Polan does not come to terms with Foucault's anti-Marxist tendencies which are noted by other commentators.[6]

Nor does Polan accept Marx's placing primacy on the economic over the ideological. Polan stands opposed to this latter concept, since his study elevates the supposed "specificity of cultural practice" over the political and economic. True, Polan does criticize certain simplistic tendencies in historical interpretation, but his work then dismisses the concepts of historical materialism and class conflict from the central position they should occupy.

Polan says that the pressures of the forties tear "narrative art between opposed goals and that this tearing leads to particularly intense contradictions." He understands cultural texts, "then, as neither inevitable apologies for a central power nor as a concerted subversion of that power; an emphasis on contradiction allows an open and variable approach to the processes of social production" (43). However, what Polan gains in demonstrating social tensions often linking such stylistically different films such as *MESHERS IN THE AFTERNOON* (1943) and *GUEST IN THE HOUSE* (1944), he does on the level of textual interpretation alone. He does not deal with such crucial factors which could also explain the reasons for such narrative tensions, such as audience reception or documented evidence of oppositional movements in U.S. society, especially in Hollywood at the time.

For example, although Polan mentions films such as *ACTION IN THE NORTH ATLANTIC* (1943), *SAHARA* (1943), and *PRIDE OF THE MARINES* (1948), he says nothing about how those films involved later-blacklisted talents. I do not wish to introduce again the antique issue of authorship into the critical debate but to argue for the presence of a particular absence, which may be just as crucial as those theoretical ones Polan argues for.

Also, although he deals with the changes in film narrative in post-War Hollywood, he says virtually nothing about Hollywood's mobilizing its right-wing, which may have as much responsibility for fissured narratives as any other factor.

Although I don't expect any of the above films to exhibit Marxist tendencies, I also don't think that any discourse from a dominant power narrative recuperates them entirely. Despite their Hollywood form, we have to see in certain films the work of talented people such as John Howard Lawson, who inserted pictures of social community triumphing over individualism as well as giving a progressive picture of a black American such as Rex Ingram in *SAHARA*. Such elements often transcended the dominant ideological framework within which they were conceived.

Despite these problems, Polan has major insights, relevant not only to interpreting forties cinema but also contributing to debates within film theory. In contrast to *GUEST IN THE HOUSE*, which affirms "happy heterosexual relationships in the service of the American way of life," Polan sees that Maya Deren's *MESHES OF THE AFTERNOON* presents the home as "a nightmarish place where women can only destroy or be destroyed and where men only come for short visits as virtual strangers." (11) These diverse narratives, Polan says, represent a

"conflict of spaces; that different representations are set up for forties women suggests that the forties exist as a potentially conflicting set of grids...I find such juxtapositions emblematic, then, both of a drive towards what we might call dominant narrative ideology and of the possible fate (s) of such a drive in its interaction with the everyday life of a culture — fate(s) that can include perhaps the very impossibility of a complete or pure dominance" (11-12).

The book's title *Power and Paranoia* indicates the ways "that a dominant power and a disturbing paranoia interweave and find each other to be a parodic mirror image of the other" (12). The first is "the power that narrative structure specifically possesses to write an image of life as coherent, ideological, univocal." The second is "the fear of narrative, and the particular social representations it works to uphold, against all that threatens the unity of its logical framework" (12). Paranoia is not "an eternally abstract condition but a specifically social way of responding to new permutations in everyday perception and possibility" (15).

Polan finds the war period "potentially a quite contradictory moment," offering

"new possibilities for narrativity while encouraging conditions which show up those possibilities as manifestly fictional. With the war, narrative finds a solution to the problems of representing history in a coherent framework while discovering that it can do so only at the cost

of repression and distortions that come bursting out under moments of narrative stress" (18).

The first chapter, "Writing the Space of the Forties," examines a little-known William Bendix comedy, *DON JUAN QUILLIGAN* (1945) to demonstrate the validity of the above statement. Here Polan takes issue with monolithic formulations about film narrative, associated with scholars such as Raymond Bellour, Janet Staiger, David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson. In discussing *QUILLIGAN*'s comic form, Polan questions "the comprehensiveness of the very construction of form and ideology that Bellour and others, claim to find not only in the Western but in the American [U.S.] cinema as a whole" (26). In particular, in its humorous treatment of accidental bigamy, the film does not follow Bellour's monolithic Oedipal trajectory (27-28), which Bellour said structured Hollywood narratives as a whole. Thus, although there may have been a stylistic discourse operative within Hollywood at the time, Polan points out that

"we also need to theorize the possibility of a slippage between the discourse and its actualization in specific historical moments in particular...[T]he psycho-social situation of the forties poses problems to narrative that narrative can't always fully contend with" (311).

This is a particularly astute recognition. It stands in contrast to recent formalist tendencies within film scholarship. It parallels V.N. Volosinov's (Mikhail Bakhtin's) recognition of the concrete importance of *parole* as opposed to *langue* in his critique of Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics.[7] Polan, inspired by Jean Baudrillard's critique of Foucault, states, "Too much of the work on American cinema shows that there is the temptation in analyzing classicism to find classicism everywhere and to thereby potentially further its dominance" (35).

However, even if "narrative in every moment is a potentially fragile construct, held in place only by the social and aesthetic conditions of that moment," (34) it still is effective as a social model. Polan here takes issue with the ahistorical practices of deconstructive criticism:

"Deconstruction performs an initially necessary analysis. It implies how every act is readable as split between teleology and a disturbing difference. But disavowing a reference to the historical field which it views as only one more form of teleology, deconstruction can only insist endlessly on the dual nature of practices without showing how, why, when, and where one side of the duality can triumph. As a consequence, deconstruction ends up minimizing the pressures of history — the ways that history works to constrain meaning within prescribed ways of seeing."

Polan finds value in Pierre Machery's suggestion that "each literary text be read as historically specific answers to the ideological questions of its historically specific moment" (38). As he criticizes the notion of the war years having an overwhelmingly "affirmative" ideology, Polan outlines his thesis: "the pressures of the forties specifically tear narrative art between opposed goals and this tearing leads to particularly intense contradictions" (43).

Examining images of Wartime Unity in his second chapter, Polan argues that "the

war-supporting discourse is avowedly discursive, announcing and enouncing itself as a message from somewhere (for example, a government agency, a star or starlet making a war bond plea) to someone...in a particular context of space and time..." (53). Within war narratives, he pays special notice to authoritative roles played by the image of Pearl Harbor (AIR FORCE, GUNG HO, 1943), questions of religious atheism (DESTINATION TOKYO, 1943), Roosevelt as a symbol, and male voice-over narration.

But enunciation, for Polan, is not Bellour's general figure establishing how classic film narrative inscribes and mediates the desire of the spectator. It here takes a different form, in which "it is possible, I think, to historicize the use of enunciation and understand the ways that it can become a particularly attractive technique for the mobilization of identification toward the goal of commitment" (65). He analyzes narratives as THE PIED PIPER (1942), ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT (1942), AIR FORCE (1943), SERGEANT YORK (1941), FLYING TIGERS (1942), CASABLANCA (1942) and MR. LUCKY (1943) as well as the feminine war-effort discourses of MRS. MINIVER (1942) and SINCE YOU WENT AWAY (1944). Yet, despite the affirmative stance of war-narratives such as PRIDE OF THE MARINES and DESTINATION TOKYO, Polan notes the limitations on totally positive meanings.

"More generally...narrative itself...is inherently open to contradiction: the sense of an ending implies that order is inevitable, but the very need to institute that order through force...implies that endings are not inevitable but need to be constructed" (99).

These limits upon narrative closure form the basis of his next chapter. He continues his critique of Raymond Bellour's narrative theory as he discusses the structure of a 1944 Errol Flynn movie, UNCERTAIN GLORY. This film counters the thesis that classic cinema is structured around a united couple and also counters the idea that the war narrative successfully unites war and desire. Several films such as A YANK IN THE R.A.F. (1941), ACTION IN THE NORTH ATLANTIC and the Blondie films also work to separate the couple from the war in diverse ways.

THE MIRACLE OF MORGAN'S CREEK questions both the basis of marriage as well as that of wartime unity (116). Issues of race, sexuality, patriarchy, and authority are all called into question within many films in this historical period and are "resolved" in specific ways which lay bare tensions and contradictions. DESPERATE JOURNEY (1942), often viewed as a *Boy's Own* fantasy, suggests a "certain disparity between the concept of heroism and the concept of an obedience to authority, although both are values promoted in the war moment" (137). Polan also describes private "conversion" narrative, portraying U.S. citizens with no military connections, emphasizing his central thesis about the ideological fragility of 40s cinema.

In chapter five, "Blind Insights and Dark Passages," Polan contrasts the stylistically and thematically opposing worlds of DARK PASSAGE and the war-affirming PRIDE OF THE MARINES, seeing in the former "the possibility of a mutation in the practice of "classical narrative" (194). This is one of Polan's richest and debatable chapters. Vincent Parry's discovery of George's body shot in an unrepeatable, ambiguous manner demonstrates DARK PASSAGE's whole narrative

complication. "In DARK PASSAGE, the narrative and the image come apart, refusing to provide any but the most meager of certainties and centerings" (195).

"If PRIDE OF THE MARINES gives us the positive existentialism of commitment to a being, DARK PASSAGE gives us the negative existentialism of commitment to a nothingness, the instabilities of life and narrative falling prey to the inescapabilities of a historical absurd" (200).

Polan defines as central historical conditions Roosevelt's death and the lack of a strong central subject for the U.S. imaginary. Surely other more complicated factors in U.S. society at the time deserve scrutiny. Earlier, Polan had criticized historical work on the forties as lacking "any complex sense of the specificity of cultural practice." He said that work tends "to extend its specific areas of analysis and claim the primacy of the political or the economic over the cultural. It tends to understand culture as a noncomplex, ultimately political or economic force" (42).

While criticisms against a vulgar Marxist reading are correct, particularly in recognizing superstructural concepts, the political and economic are determinant in the last resort. This whole issue needs more detailed, historical research rather than merely stating that the condition of representation in the 40s is one in which "desire refuses a place within narrative, [and] splits off and becomes an independent force" (203). Similarly, Polan is too simplistic in describing Roosevelt's benign oedipalism or the early Truman's confused non-leadership (204).

Polan says that he intends to analyze a "*tendency* within the textual space of the typical studio product." [8] Other more complicated historical and economic factors deserve citation.

It would be interesting to learn why he did not discuss A GENTLEMAN'S AGREEMENT (1947), CROSSFIRE (1947) and TILL THE END OF TIME (1946), all of which deal with internal problems within U.S. society (anti-Semitism, the problems of the returning veteran, sexual relations) and all made by people who would fall under HUAC's scrutiny. There may be other more historical reasons for the changes in themes and narratives which Polan notices other than his Foucault-influenced, narrative theories. These reasons may also lie outside the theoretical parameters of the shadows of Althusser and Lacan which clearly influence Polan.

The final chapter, "Beyond Narrative: The Space and Spectacle of the Forties," continues Polan's demonstration of how forties narratives are unstable. He gives a comprehensive survey of fictional and filmic representations of the home as alien space, the anti-epic Western, the technological triumph over nature in the musical, the insecurity of escapist idyllic space, the failure of the pastoral ideal, and the problems of female desire in the modern gothic romance.

I find other qualifications necessary. The thirties also had anti-epic westerns as well as the forties. STAGECOACH as well as THE VIRGINIAN (1929) also parallel Polan's examples of the forties' DUEL IN THE SUN which he sees as marking the end of rugged individualism.

In terms of the wealth of material examined, engagement with critical concepts in

film study, and stimulating arguments, Polan's work is worth close study. However, in view of the complexity of the forties period, the diversity of cultural products, and the actual engagement of filmmakers in struggle, much more work is needed in examining this area. The academic examination of discourse is of value, but we need to move beyond it to discover historical complexities. We must go beyond the confines of the "specific community of scholars producing major work on the American [U.S.] cinema" to restore the past in its full dimensions and recognize the crucial role of those engaged in cultural struggles. The mere examination of narrative structure cannot do the forties full justice.

NOTES

1. See David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
2. For a critique of this tendency see Andrew Britton, "In Defense of Criticism," *CineAction!*, No. 3/4 (January, 1986), pp. 3-5.
3. For references to Althusserian and Lacanian influence, see Polan (40 and 306). For a critique of the Althusserian mystique, see Simon Clarke, et al, *One Dimensional Marxism: Althusser and the Politics of Culture* (London and New York: Allison and Busby, 1980).
4. See Chuck Kleinhans, "Introduction: Hollywood Reconsidered," *Jump Cut*, No. 32 (1987), p. 15.
5. As a British citizen, I was astonished to see so few films from various stages of Hollywood cinema screened on non-cable U.S. television. The four British television stations once provided a virtual film theatre for those interested enough to watch, but that situation is now changing under Thatcherite attacks on the media and the current tendency to buy cheap U.S. made-for-TV movies and soap operas.
6. See Britton's "Had not Foucault asserted that marxism led to the Gulag archipelago?" (p. 3).
7. V. N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (New York: Seminar Press, 1973).
8. Barry King, "The Classical Hollywood Cinema," *Screen*, 27:6 (November-December, 1986), p. 42. One must applaud Polan's questioning many tenets of the neo-Formalist school, particularly Bordwell's definition of film noir conventions (Polan, pp. 323-25).

Labor's stake in the electronic cinema revolution

by Michael Nielsen

from *Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, pp. 78-84

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1990, 2006

In a previous article published in the *Journal of Film and Video*, I commented briefly on the impact of electronic cinema on the workers employed in the theatrical motion picture industry. (Nielsen, 1984) In this paper, I want to more completely address the labor issues raised by the transition from film to video to tape in any or all of the three branches of the film business-production, distribution, and exhibition.

In order to understand the context of the contemporary labor situation in the film industry, it's useful to have at least a cursory background in Hollywood's labor history. Back in the 1910s, the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees (IATSE) claimed jurisdiction over motion picture machine operators (more commonly referred to today as "projectionists") and shortly thereafter over motion picture production work. IATSE saw this as a defensive move, recognizing that many of its stagehand members were losing their jobs when live performance theaters were converted to motion picture theaters.

But merely asserting jurisdiction on paper was not enough to secure jurisdiction in fact. Several other American Federation of Labor (AFL) unions also became involved in motion picture work, particularly the Carpenters and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). IATSE was also an AFL affiliate and made frequent appeals to the parent labor body for clear jurisdiction over all branches of the motion picture industry. Unfortunately, the AFL could not settle the job disputes in the motion picture industry for a variety of reasons, particularly because none of the unions involved would accept compromise solutions. Thus, jurisdictional fights in the picture industry continued until the late 1940s, when IATSE emerged from a series of violent strikes as the dominant union representing a great variety of film technicians and theatrical employees, ranging from the very well-paid cinematographers to the near-minimum wage concession workers in many large city theaters. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) conducted representational elections in 1948 that resulted in IATSE obtaining jurisdiction over nearly all production work. (Nielsen, 1983)

The major motion picture producers accepted IATSE Hollywood locals as hiring halls from which they drew employees based on union seniority lists. IATSE

originally organized all its Hollywood film production workers into a single large local, but it has since established a large number of locals based on particular crafts. This form of organization is called horizontal. At present, more than 40 separate locals, the majority of which are IATSE affiliates, are involved in motion picture technical work. An alternative scheme of organization ("vertical") groups different job categories together in large locals based on geographical or corporate boundaries. This vertical organizational scheme forms the basis of large AFL unions such as the United Auto Workers and relatively small unions such as the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians (NABET).

Transitional points in the history of the industry such as the introduction of sound motion pictures inevitably produced inter-union and inter-local conflicts regarding jurisdiction over new classes of work. It could be argued that such divisive relations among the unions actually benefited the producers, because union officials often discounted wage rates in the spirit of getting a foot in the door of new technologies. In the case of sound motion pictures, the fight was between IATSE and the IBEW over which union would control the sound engineer jobs. In the early 1930s, IATSE more successfully organized the sound engineers than the IBEW. But in 1933, IATSE blundered by calling a walkout against the producers to gain recognition for the sound local. IBEW sound technicians crossed the IATSE picket lines as did many other AFL unions, leading to the almost complete elimination of IATSE from the studios. IATSE became reduced from a force of several thousand production workers down to less than 200 full-time workers. (Nielsen, 1983, pp. 5964)

In the next two years, IATSE conducted a campaign to recover the production jobs lost to the IBEW and the Carpenters. A key factor in this recovery was the union's control of the projection booths. A projectionists' walkout was threatened in 1935, a strike that would have hit the major companies where it hurt, at the box offices of the theaters that the major firms owned. IATSE demanded and got the first closed-shop agreement with the major production companies. This meant that workers in several job categories could not work for the largest companies without joining IATSE. Twelve-thousand workers were forced to rejoin IATSE locals or lose their jobs. (Nielsen, 1983, pp. 66-7)

Several examples like that of the introduction of sound motion pictures could be cited to demonstrate that union control of the motion picture workers has always been closely tied to the technology and structure of the industry at any given point. In terms of structure, the vertical integration of the "majors" in the period 1920-48 made those dominant companies quite vulnerable to a projectionists' sympathetic boycott. IATSE has used its control of projectionists, along with film lab and film exchange jobs as a means of achieving certain bargaining ends with producers. The union label (known as the "bug") was a mark that told the various workers in the chain of production-distribution-exhibition whether or not a film was made under union conditions.

In technological terms, perhaps the greatest challenge to the established patterns of control for both management and labor has been the introduction of television. As early as the 1930s, IATSE leaders expressed concern over the coming of television and the possible impact that television might have on employment opportunities for the union's members. By the late 1940s, television had clearly become more than just a possibility. In several metropolitan areas over 100

stations were already on the air and providing home delivery of live and filmed entertainment. Twentieth Century-Fox and Paramount both became involved in early broadcasting experiments. (Smoodin, 1982) A great many of the television stations started with built-in labor unions as radio broadcasting companies formed the nucleus of the new industry. The IBEW and the National Association of Broadcast Engineers (later broadened to "Employees") and Technicians (NABET) organized radio technical work in the 1920s and 1930s. By the dawn of the television era, IBEW had a firm hold on CBS engineers while NABET represented technicians and non-technical workers at both NBC and ABC (formerly NBC-Blue). IATSE formed a special Radio-TV Department in 1951 to assert jurisdiction over television.

In the next two decades, the three contending unions carved up the television pie through a series of NLRB elections and voluntary agreements aimed at clearing up jurisdiction over video and film camera operators, projectionists, film editors, lighting technicians, sound technicians, teleprompter operators, and so forth. At stake were tens of thousands of new jobs at the networks, local stations and new independent production companies. (Wasko, 1983, pp. 8692)

While there have been several skirmishes in the 1970s and 1980s over the control of jobs at particular stations, the labor relations situation for the technical unions in broadcasting has remained relatively calm since the late 1960s. At the risk of oversimplification, the boundaries between NABET and IATSE have been drawn to give the film union control of film and stage production work and to give work related to electronics to NABET. Thus, television studio lighting has generally been conceded to IATSE, as has the operation of 16mm and 35mm film cameras. The operation of video cameras and video tape machines has been the domain of NABET. But important exceptions to this rule have developed as outlined below.

If the technology of videotape had remained at the level set when Ampex brought out the first two-inch VTRs, when the only broadcast quality video cameras weighed in at 100 pounds, the simple demarcation of tape vs. film might have proved a workable jurisdictional boundary. But the development of portable video equipment of broadcast quality (a.k.a., Electronic News Gathering equipment) has eliminated the film production departments at virtually all television stations. Unused film developing machines which long ago lost their commercial value to local television stations sit in dusty basements alongside the old Ampex videotape consoles. In their place sit compact half-inch and three-quarter-inch videotape recorders and editing units, and the former IATSE film camera operators and editors have either changed jobs or unions.

Videotape editing has changed television national program production significantly. While a few comedy programs such as CHEERS are still produced on film, the great majority of comedies, as well as daily soap operas, game shows, and talk shows are now produced and edited on videotape. Those programs produced on tape at the majors' studios have come under the jurisdiction of IATSE. Walter Diehl, former International President of IATSE stated at a union gathering in 1981 that regardless of the format of program origination, his union will maintain control of the majors' studios.

This control cannot be maintained without yielding to certain economic pressures from IATSE's primary rival in television program production, NABET. The kind of

concessions that IATSE has made in recent years have been over flexible crew requirements and wage scales geared toward handling both low and high budget productions. (Dobuler, 1981) For its part, NABET has become something of a "hiring hall" for lower budget features, television programs, and commercials. Jurisdictional issues have become subsumed under the more pragmatic issue of which union can offer the best deal to a particular production company. For the workers involved in production, just getting into either union can offer enough challenge. They have little or no chance of working in both unions; members are prohibited from holding cards in both unions.

But the video revolution has also begun to affect the theatrical film industry. In recent years, we've seen the development of a variety of video systems that are transforming the filmmaking process and offer the promise (or threat, depending on one's perspective) of shaking up the entire chain of production, distribution, and exhibition. The idea of shooting theatrical films with video cameras is not new. The technology has been under development since the 1950s, and several films have been released since the ill-fated Electronovision production of HARLOW in 1965. The problem with Electronovision system was apparently that the image definition was not up to 35mm standards. *Variety* called the images in HARLOW grainy and poorly lit. (May 19, 1965, p.6)

But in the succeeding two decades, video technology has improved greatly, to the point that even the film-dominated *American Cinematographer* has begun to take video seriously in articles with titles like "Film or Video." (Patterson, 1982) Given the proper economic and aesthetic considerations, it is conceivable that video may become preferable to film in most production situations. The lesson from the television industry should not be missed. Television stations made the change from 16mm film news to videotape news when it made economic sense. The motion picture industry will probably do the same, but what are the factors that would fit into this equation? Let's consider the potential changes and their consequences for workers and labor unions in the motion picture industry.

Perhaps the most visible sign of video inroads into the film industry is in the editing room. Film editors and directors with sufficient capital can now use a variety of new offline editing systems such as Montage and Editdroid to make videotape workprints that can be matched with 35mm footage. The movement toward computerized editing is not motivated solely by the need to reduce costs. People such as Francis Ford Coppola are very interested in the creative potential of new film/video hybrids. During the peak of activity of Coppola's Zoetrope Studios, his staff developed a video-assisted editing system that offers new creative opportunities for film directors to mix finished shots and sequences with stills, storyboards, and rehearsals. (Fielding, 1984)

However, the major motive in the development of the new computer-based editing systems is to reduce labor costs incurred in post-production. In a recent interview in *The New York Times*, Jim McGee, a post-production supervisor for Centerpoint Productions noted:

"You no longer have to hunt for the right snippet of film dangling somewhere from a clothesline like laundry in a backyard. Every scene is indexed in the computer memory and you can call it up instantly on a monitor screen. You no longer have to thread it into a Moviola. No

more frame counting, either. The duration of every piece of action is stored in the computer down to the last fraction of a second. We can now do all the editing on a 90-minute show in three or four days. It used to take three weeks. Now translate that into costs, and you wind up with a much cheaper production." (Fantel, 1985)

Kodak has developed a magnetically-coated film called Datakode that can be coded to correspond to videotape segments. Note that, according to Kodak, Datakode was developed to enable automation of "labor-intensive, non-creative aspects of motion-picture production," in the areas of production, post-production, and distribution. (*SMPTE Journal*, April 1983, p. 379) A great deal of film splicing can now wait until the final assembly stage of editing.

As these computerized systems become increasingly user-friendly and come down in price, the traditional manner of film editing may face extinction. This is not to say that there will no longer be room for creative film editors, but that the opportunity will exist for film directors and producers to participate more directly in the editing process. The computer-assisted editing systems make it easier to cut and paste images sequentially without actually having to splice the pieces of film to view the effect. Previously, the skills of splicing film and the sense of visual continuity went hand in hand — the film editor provided just this sort of hands-on go-between in the filmmaking process. Because the film splicing process was painstakingly slow, a director could hardly be expected to handle both directing and editing. Now, however, it seems possible that the video editing systems almost beg directors to try their hand at editing their own films. In this new scheme of things, it seems that there would be strong incentives for producers to demand new work rules in post-production that would substantially reduce the labor costs through elimination of various editing personnel.

Videotape is a cost-effective intermediate step in the editing process for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that the contracts with IATSE film editors call for lower wage rates for videotape editing than for film editing. The IATSE New York Editors Local 771 has attempted to equalize these two rates in recent years, but they do this at the risk of driving the producers into NABET shops. (Dobuler, 1983) Secondly, as noted above by Jim McGee, video-assisted editing is fast in comparison to film-only editing.

This is especially important to producers because of the high costs of financing a production. The greatest costs are incurred during the filming process but the interest due on borrowed funds escalates as post-production work drags on. Raymond Fielding, who was directly involved with Zoetrope Studio's attempts to streamline post-production work through electronic systems, has likened the interest costs in the post-production period to a "ticking time bomb." (Fielding, 1984)

As with many other technological innovations, the development of videotape editing in motion picture production has driven a wedge between two important groups of IATSE film technicians: the film editors and the sound technicians. Assuming that a good deal of editing is now done off-line on videotape (which can combine sound and image editing in a single process), a question of jurisdiction arises. For example, the current President of IATSE, Walter Diehl, has supported the film and videotape editors in their attempts to control this new field, to the

great agitation of the many sound technicians. The leaders of the Hollywood sound technicians' local recently blocked the implementation of a state-sponsored job retraining program intended to train editors in the new videotape and video-assisted editing techniques. (*Variety*, March 9, 1983, pp. 4, 32; May 22, 1984, pp. 4, 46) This situation illustrates the previously mentioned divisive effects of new technologies on groups of workers and their local unions.

In addition to computer-assisted editing, there is a distinct possibility that film itself could be eliminated from any or all three stages of theatrical motion picture production, distribution and exhibition. Sony has been working on High-Definition Television (HDTV) systems for over a decade now, aiming at developing the technology in as many different applications as possible. The Sony HDTV system produces video images that approximate the resolution of 35mm film by greatly increasing the number of picture elements per video frame. The immediately obvious application would be in the area of developing advanced television system to replace the current 525-line systems used in the U.S. and Japan. However, an HDTV broadcast system seems unlikely at this time because HDTV channels are five times as wide as normal U.S. television channels. (Various technologies are now under development to reduce the channel width of HDTV.

It is far more likely that HDTV will find its first uses in the printing, computer display and motion picture industries, i.e., in closed-circuit applications. In these applications, HDTV's high bandwidth requirements are not a problem. Sony has been developing HDTV equipment such as cameras, signal systems, recorders, telecine (film chains), and laser-based tape-to-film transfer systems that could find immediate applications in the motion picture production industry. (Green and Morss, 1984)

Image Transform has developed a 24 frames per second video system with a greater number of lines of resolution, (called Imagevision) for originating theatrical films on tape. The taped images are transferred to 35mm film for theatrical release. *MONTY PYTHON LIVE AT THE HOLLYWOOD BOWL* and *RICHARD PRYOR IN CONCERT* are two films that have taken advantage of this new system. The Monty Python concert was recorded with four video cameras and one film camera, edited entirely on videotape, and released in 35mm. (Glickman, 1981) Obviously, Hollywood producers view the Imagevision system as only second-best at present, but it does seem to have found a niche — namely in covering live events such as concerts for later release in theaters.

Thus far, there has been little talk in technical circles about the possibility of film's total elimination from the chain of motion picture production. Longtime cinematographers are quite skeptical about the "cost-cutting" aspects of video production. Wadsworth Publishers has just issued the first "textbook" on *Electronic Cinematography* in which the authors, Harry Mathias and Richard Patterson claim that tape may in fact be more expensive than film in most applications. To get video cameras to produce the kind of images possible with film, the authors argue, cinematographers will need to understand waveform monitors (graphic displays of video signals) as well as they understand film stock and various developing processes. Also, they note that the idea of tape as a cheap medium is largely a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"Since the client and the producer decided to shoot a commercial on videotape

because it's supposed to be cheaper, they then pay the crew less, use a smaller crew with less lighting and grip equipment, and have a tighter shooting schedule and a lower shooting ratio-all because video is supposed to be cheaper."

Simply put, the "film look" is not only a product of technological determinants, but also the result of careful lighting on a shot-by-shot basis. Videography has tended to rely on the "cheap and dirty" technique of flat lighting. We, as the audience, have rather low expectations of the depth and texture of video images. The superb videography of many BBC dramatic productions suggest a greater aesthetic potential for videotape than that realized on THE COSBY SHOW or FAMILY TIES.

But there are some indications that the major production studios are revising their production practices to accommodate the rapidly changing technological environment for the various stages of production, distribution and "exhibition" (in quotes here to include videocassettes, cable, and videodiscs, in addition to the traditional theatrical release). The production companies now carefully consider a variety of factors when deciding whether to originate a television program on tape or film, and when deciding what kind of intermediate steps should be taken between production and distribution of television programs and feature films. John Whitman of Universal cites a number of determining factors in his company's decision of whether to originate on film or tape. Broadly speaking, these are the final release format, program type, financial and creative considerations, time restrictions, and labor and equipment costs. (Weston, 1983) Universal and the other large Hollywood studios are trying to develop flexible production strategies to hold costs to a minimum. But to succeed in these cost-cutting strategies, the studios need the full cooperation of the unions involved.

A real hammer that the studios could use against IATSE to get the union's cooperation is the threat of turning over the electronic cinema production jobs to NABET. This strategy goes against the grain of well-established relationships between the producers and the majority of their technician-employees. Although NABET has managed to secure jobs for its members with a large number of independent low-budget productions (and probably a few "back-door-financed" independent productions), the large budget productions of the major studios has remained the exclusive domain of IATSE.

But let's take the electronic cinema scenario one step further. The ultimate electronic cinema system would involve the development of high-definition video systems capable of filling a theater-sized screen with images that match the average platter house operation of today. (In these theaters, a single projector is used to show an entire feature with trailers by splicing all the reels together onto a large flat platter.) If you have been to one of these platter houses, you have probably noticed that, to quote a line from a song by the Band: "The good old days, they're all gone." Nonunion projectionists operate the equipment in at least sixty percent of all theaters today.

"Non-union projectionist" represents a euphemism for "no projectionist" since the non-union operators also sell popcorn or manage the theater. In the majority of theaters, nobody stays in the booth during the actual film projection. The presence of an experienced projectionist does not guarantee a quality show, but the absence of any projectionist frequently results in an inferior showing. 35mm film projection has a critical problem with focus. Different reels of the same film often have

different surface characteristics and demand different focus settings. Also, as the aperture area of the projector and the lens heat up, focus characteristics also change. In short, even with platter systems, a certain amount of prudent baby-sitting remains necessary to provide a quality film showing. In most theaters today, we do not get this level of quality.

In other words, video projection really doesn't need to be all that great to match the average film presentation of today. In fact, if an all-electronic system could merely deliver fair images in a manner more consistent than that of the average platter house of today, that system might actually be preferable to the current state of affairs in most theaters. Essaness Theaters in Chicago has already begun experiments in video projection, combining elements of several systems to deliver video images of 35mm quality to a theatrical audience. A test run of the system was carried out with the willing cooperation of the Chicago IATSE projectionist's local 110. (Segers, 1984a, b) According to an article in *The New York Times*, the youthful audience most liked the video theater's Dolby sound system, truly a weak link in the many film theaters that do not have optical Dolby sound systems. (October 2, 1984)

Sony has created a chain of 200 video theaters in several Tokyo shopping centers using 3/4-inch videocassettes as the transmission medium. This "Cinematic" system will soon be marketed on a world-wide basis. (Segers, 1983) Still under development is a video projection system that, unlike most current systems, would not project beams of electrons at all. Rather, light from a standard xenon projection lamp (the kind used in most 35mm film projectors) would illuminate an aperture containing a tiny translucent liquid crystal display screen. The display would change according to digital video signals. This system could brightly illuminate a very large screen, run unattended, and provide digital sound of a quality unattainable by either optical or magnetic systems. (Fisher, 1984) The video theater per se is clearly not a future trip but a 1985 reality.

Let's mix this information with a seemingly unrelated bit of film industry news. Shortly after Reagan's inauguration in 1981, the U.S. Department of Justice began an exhaustive review of the 1948 Consent Decrees that forced the five major film production/ distribution/ exhibition firms to divest themselves of their theater chains. The Justice Department invited comments from the affected parties. As of this writing, the battle has come to a quiet halt, largely due to the strong objections to vacating the 1948 Decrees offered by the National Association of Theater Owners (NATO). (Tusher, 1985)

Let us assume that the Justice Department does eventually exercise the extreme option of vacating the decrees. Then the major producer/ distributors could buy out a chain of theaters and operate an all-electronic cinema chain based of the kinds of systems now available from Sony and the video projector manufacturers such as General Electric and Hitachi. Such a system might mean the wholesale elimination of jobs in three areas — film laboratories, film exchanges, and the already largely abandoned projection booths. "Films" could be delivered by videodiscs, videocassettes, satellites, or some combination of these technologies.

The great irony of the potential elimination of projectionists altogether is that these workers at one time were among the highest paid craft workers in the industry. As noted previously, IATSE used its control of projectionists, film lab technicians and

film exchange workers a bargaining tool. But since the Paramount Decrees of 1948, exhibition has become separated from the other two sectors of the industry. At present, any attempt by IATSE projectionists to refuse to project films made under "unfair" conditions would probably result in a theater management lock-out. This lock-out would be backed by contract law and the terms of the Taft-Hartley Act, which has clauses prohibiting the use of such "secondary boycotts."

Thus, IATSE, which at several times in the past had the potential of becoming "one big entertainment union," encompassing broadcasting, motion picture, and live theatrical workers, is now one among several competing unions involved in the various entertainment industries. In the last five years, the rank-and-file members of IATSE and NA-BET production locals have called for a merger between the two unions. But such a merger seems at present only a dim possibility.

The issue of videotape jurisdiction remains as unclear as ever, and NABET has established itself as a low-cost alternative source for motion picture technicians. Membership in NABET costs much less than joining IATSE production locals, and NABET crew arrangements have become far more flexible (and thus less costly) than have those of IATSE. IATSE has accused NABET of "raiding" its members working at WOR-TV in New York, and during a recent NABET strike at that station, IATSE technicians crossed NABET picket lines to work. The bitterness of these exchanges was given public display in a quarter-page *Variety* ad taken out by NABET accusing IATSE of "scabbing." Thus, hopes for a merger are not good at this time. (*Variety*, December 26, 1984, p. 6)

The net result of this dissension among the craft unions involved in broadcasting and film is that the producers have continued to have the upper hand in all negotiations. The unions seem too concerned with their immediate organizational needs to recognize fully the potential impact of new technologies. The inability of writers and directors to get what they consider their fair cut of residuals out of videocassette sale and rentals is but one example of how shortsighted the entertainment industry unions have been thus far. All of the talk in the technical journals about reductions in costs through elimination of certain "uncreative" steps in the various production/ distribution/ exhibition processes is more than just talk.

It should be a call to arms for the unions involved. But just as the projectionists have gradually gone the way of the blacksmiths in many cities, it seems that the producers will be able even more easily to toss out the many production and post-production workers who are hired on a picture-by-picture basis. And if the fulfillment of the totally electronic cinema system comes to pass, there seems little hope for the thousands of workers employed in film labs and film exchanges.

This disappointing scenario may be tempered somewhat by the thought that the electronic age that would make possible the elimination of many jobs in the motion picture industry, has also stimulated the development of more productions to meet the voracious appetite of the new program outlets of cable and video software. Also, the ever-spiralling drive toward more sophisticated technology leaves behind in its wake what JUMP CUT co-editor John Hess has called a "detritus" of salvageable film and video gear that can be effectively put to use by independent film and video producers/artists.

For the film technicians, however, the fact remains that there presently exist no

plans to retrain projectionists, lab technicians, and film exchange employees to take advantage of these new production jobs, nor is there the appropriate economic geography to even make such a plan feasible. If we can take the projectionists as the example of how other workers will fare in this technological transformation, then there seems little future for the workers who will be eliminated with the emergence of electronic cinema. Neither the union nor management seems to have the interests of the workers at heart.

The goal in development of electronic cinema is toward efficiency in organization and production. The film unions, like unions bargaining for workers in many other U.S. industries, seem to be unable or unwilling to resist the demands for increased automation and elimination of jobs. The producers welcome dual unionism in the film and television production industry because it allows them to play the unions off against one another. A merger of IATSE and NABET, a common-sense solution that the rank-and-file can understand, and indeed, have called for in recent years, can only take place when the leaders of the two unions place worker welfare above organizational needs, i.e., the need to have as large a membership as possible to support the union officers in the manner to which they have become accustomed.

REFERENCES

"Coast editors local sues sound local over tape editing." *Variety*, May 22, 1984, pp. 4, 46.

Dobuler, S. (1981) 'IATSE crews make venture into TV on *Baker's Dozen*. *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 23, pp. 1, 13.

Dobuler, S. (1983) "New York editors 771 reach interim accord with majors." *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 6, p.3.

Fantel, H. (1985) "TV methods change film making." *The New York Times*, March 12, 1985, p. 18.

Fielding, R. (1984) "Recent electronic innovations in professional motion picture production." *Journal of Film and Video* 36, (Spring), pp. 43-9.

Fisher, (3. (1984) "Beam me up to the booth, Scotty." *Boxoffice*, March, pp. 44-6.

Glickman, R. (1981) "Tech talk: an available high resolution video system." *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 3, p. 11.

Green, R. & Morss, D. (1984) "Production experience with high-definition television." *SMPTE Journal*, February, pp. 169-74.

"IA getting lotsa union pressure for crossing NABET picket lines." *Variety*, September 19, 1984, p.46.

Loynd, R. (1983) "West coast locals ask ouster of IATSE's Diehl & Bernay." *Variety*, March 9, pp. 4. 32.

Mathias, H. and Patterson, R. (1985) *Electronic Cinematography*. Belmont CA: Wadsworth.

"Movie theater tests tv technique." *The New York Times*, October 2, 1984.

Nielsen, M. (1983) "Toward a workers' history of the U.S. film industry." In Mosco, V. & Wasko, J., eds., *The Critical Communications Review, Volume 1: Labor, the Working Class, and the Media*, Norwood, NJ: Ablex, pp. 47-84.

Nielsen, M. (1984) "Hollywood's high frontier: the emergence of electronic cinema." *Journal of Film and Video* 36, (Spring), pp. 31-42.

Patterson, R. (1982) "Tape or film? Part II: Image quality with film-to-tape and direct tape." *American Cinematographer*, May, pp. 494-7.

"Scabbing beefs kill hopes for Intl. Alliance, NABET merger." *Variety*, December 26, 1984, pp. 6, 22.

Segers, F. (1983) "Video theaters getting Tokyo debut." *Variety*, September 7, pp. 3, 33.

Segers, F. (1984a) "Videotape theater open for business in Chicago suburb." *Variety*, September 26, pp.1,114.

Segers, F. (1984b) "Test satellite feature distrib to local sites." *Variety*, December 19, pp. 1, 93.

Smoodin, E. (1982) "Motion pictures and television, 1930-1945: a pre-history of the relations between the two media." *Journal of the University Film and Video Association* 34, (Summer), pp. 38.

"To all IATSE members; this man is a scab." *Variety*, October 10, 1984. (advertisement)

Tusher, W. (1985) "Decision about consent decrees expected soon from Justice Dept." *Variety*, January 2, pp. 3, 19.

Wasko, J. (1983) "Trade unions and broadcasting: a case study of the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians." In Mosco, V. & Wasko, J., eds., *The Critical Communications Review, Volume 1: Labor, the Working Class and the Media*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, pp. 85-114.

Weston, D. (1983) "Film and video: options for production." *SPMTE Journal*, November, pp. 1214-21.

Down and Out in Beverly Hills. Rocky IV. Aliens New Cold War sequels and remakes

by Christine Anne Holmlund

from *Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, pp. 85-96

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1990, 2006

A New Cold War rages on movie screens across the United States. Scores of recent Hollywood films, most of them genre films, pit the United States against Russia or against Russian satellites. The films also marshal U.S. and Allied support behind U.S. foreign and domestic policy. TOP GUN (Scott: 1986), HEARTBREAK RIDGE (Eastwood: 1986), WHITE NIGHTS (Hackford: 1985), THE HIGHLANDER (Mulcahy: 1986), RED DAWN (Milius: 1984) and the three Rambo films (FIRST BLOOD (Kotcheff: 1982), RAMBO: FIRST BLOOD, PART II (Cosmatos: 1986) and RAMBO III (Stallone: 1988) represent a few, obvious examples of this widespread and diverse phenomenon. Other, less overtly xenophobic and chauvinistic films also inscribe and articulate New Cold War concerns.

Despite much talk about New Cold War films as a current Hollywood trend, few critics understand the scope and functioning of New Cold War ideology in movies. All too often, both the popular press and more academically oriented film critics dismiss these films as manipulative and "bad," overlooking the films' value as entertainment. Such critics emphasize ideological containment and ignore the possibility of counter-hegemonic readings. Even Andrew Britton's perceptive "Reaganite Entertainment" occasionally succumbs to these tendencies. Britton focuses on films made in the late 70s and 80s, and he interprets them in light of what he calls Reaganite ideology. He does acknowledge that "the films' negation or recuperation of history has the effect of a potential weakness as well as a strength." Yet he concludes that in these films Reaganite ideology emerges victorious, if empty. His analysis glosses over contradictions within the film texts, and it ignores the divergent reactions found among individual audience members and among audience subgroups defined by race, sex, class, sexuality and subculture.[\[1\]](#)[\[open notes in new window\]](#)

The films' success does not simply result from their enthusiastically presenting a New Cold War. Their strongest appeal often comes from the way they revert to earlier U.S. value systems, or from how they include value systems implicitly or overtly opposed to New Cold War tenets. In other words, these films contain something for everyone. Ideology becomes embedded in and interwoven with entertainment. Cultural diversity and division are not just ignored, they are integrated into the film fictions. As a result, these movies are not simply expressions of New Cold War ideology, they also *constitute* it and *undercut* it in the

process of incorporating a variety of personal and social anxieties and desires into a representational mode.

I examine here three recent Hollywood films to explore this process. I have chosen to analyze *DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS* (Mazursky:1985), *ROCKY IV* (Stallone: 1985) and *ALIENS* (Cameron: 1986) for two reasons. First, they are either sequels or remakes. While we could dismiss them as purely formulaic, we can use the fact that they are sequels and remakes to grasp the historical dimensions of how Hollywood cinema has inscribed New Cold War ideology. How films incorporate new cultural, historical and ideological material becomes more than usually obvious when we compare sequels and remakes to each other and to the original films.

Second, each film represents different genre mixes — one is satire and farce; another, sports and adventure; and the third, horror and science fiction. In spite of such genre variety, all three films rely on a New Cold War's premise and promise for their plots, characters, and/or settings. The genre range demonstrates the phenomenon's pervasiveness at the same time that it helps us identify the elements which constitute this ideology.

To analyze these films, I will concentrate on how roles within the family, relations of race and class, and relations between the dominant culture and yuppie and punk subcultures serve as nodal points for cinema to elaborate current ideological concerns. In New Cold War films like these, I will argue, economic fears become rewritten as sexual dilemmas, and white subcultures and racial minorities become subsumed within or behind the white middle class family. Yet the presence of strong female, non-white and/or counter-cultural characters does indicate that social change has occurred and is occurring. Like a thread that runs throughout their fictions, all three films depict a resurgent United States' posture of strength, yet the films also refer constantly to fear of weakness. Memories about both Vietnam and social protest coexist and collide as cinematic fictions use the past and future to shore up, disguise or replace the present.

For us as activists and critics, these films provide an opportunity to raise crucial political, theoretical questions. Why are these films so successful at the box office? Why do women as well as men, blacks as well as whites relish Rambo, Rocky and Ripley? Do such films merely inscribe the ideology of a dominant, right-wing, New Cold War — or Reaganite ideology, as Britton suggests — or is their message broader and more contradictory? How, where, and why might audience reactions differ? These questions and their answers would not just indicate relations among author, text, and reader but also a possibility of and necessity for social and political resistance and change.

TROUBLE IN PARADISE: *DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS*

At first sight Paul Mazursky's comedy, *DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS*, does not seem to have anything to do with the New Cold War. A remake over fifty years later of Jean Renoir's pre-Popular Front film, *BOUDU SAUVE DES EAUX* (*BOUDU SAVED FROM DROWNING*, 1932), Mazursky's film gently satirizes the guilty complacency of Beverly Hills nouveaux riches and North American consumer culture in general without overtly addressing questions of foreign or domestic policy or, as Renoir's film does, without hinting at possibilities for class

solidarity and structural change.

Instead, *DOWN AND OUT* uses the family to act out and cover up New Cold War desires and anxieties. In *DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS*, the Whiteman family acts both progressively and traditionally, capable under strong paternal leadership of absorbing any and all subcultures, from punks to gays to blacks to Mexicans and a host of others. In much the same way, the political rhetoric of the Carter and Reagan administrations appealed nostalgically to the security the nuclear family supposedly offered. In this way the government deflected attention from the economic and political gains achieved by the women's, black and gay movements of the 1960s and 70s and weakened the appeal of counter-cultural movements like the hippies and the punks. Within the political framework of the late 70s to late 80s, governmental allusions to both domestic prosperity and Soviet threat sidestepped the economic and political challenges posed by First World countries or power blocs (Japan, OPEC, Europe, etc.). It also inhibited understanding the indigenous threats to U.S. dominance in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

The politics of *DOWN AND OUT* are more liberal or at least more contradictory. The film both acknowledges and subsumes sexual, racial, class and national difference. Yet in the broader context of New Cold War rhetoric, fluctuations like these commonly occur because liberals and conservatives do not stand necessarily opposed. On the contrary, as sociologist Alan Wolfe convincingly argues, the myth of a New Cold War has its political origins in the semi-conscious alliance between liberals and the radical right which has dominated U.S. politics since World War II.^[2]

DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS takes as its subject, homelessness, a favorite theme of the mid 1980s. Dave Whiteman (Richard Dreyfuss) and his family adopt a street person, Jerry Baskin (Nick Nolte) when Jerry tries to drown himself in their swimming pool. Although Dave tries to convince Jerry to go straight and get a job, Jerry refuses, preferring to lounge around the house, drink lo-cal sodas, play the piano, and screw Dave's neurotic wife (Bette Midler), his Mexican maid (Elizabeth Peña) and his anorexic daughter (Tracy Nelson). Despite the comic mishaps Jerry provokes, at the end of the film the Whiteman family welcomes him as one of its members, but not having him marry into it.

Ostensibly class difference lies at the heart of *DOWN AND OUT*'s humor. Yet like so many Hollywood films, this film finally remains indifferent to class. Unlike the tramp in *BOUDU*, Mazursky's bum does not function so disruptively within the family. Just the fact that the director chose the family swimming pool rather than the Pacific ocean for Jerry's suicide attempt indicates how Mazursky domesticated and privatized the politics of the original *BOUDU*. There M. Lestingois' (Charles Granval) rescues Boudu (Michel Simon) in a public setting. Renoir structured his film around class difference in 1930s France. As Christopher Faulkner puts it, in *BOUDU*, "the whole point... is to preserve the sense of the incompatibility of two social classes and the irrevocable barriers between them."^[3]

Similarly, Jerry and Boudu have opposed characterizations. As befits the first R-rated film from the Disney studios, Jerry seems amazingly well-bred, capable of reciting Shakespeare and playing Debussy. As a result, several critics have remarked that Jerry functions more like an innocent apolitical left-over hippie than

a social pariah or anarchist (Corliss; O'Brien, Ap. 11, 1986). In contrast, Boudu not only lacks cultural savoir faire, as Michel Simon portrays the character, he even has difficulty walking a straight line. The two films also have radically different endings. DOWN AND OUT's narrative, in contrast to BOUDU's, does not need to marry Jerry off to the maid, and thus has no need to confront a threat of "miscegenation," a spectre which vies with homosexuality for the title "all-time worst nightmare" in the squeaky clean universe of Disney thought. Jerry's extraordinary sexual appeal, virility and promiscuity might exclude him from Disneyland, but in the context of a Disney film for adults, they guarantee heterosexuality — on which the Disney empire rests.^[4] By ending with Jerry's return to the family, DOWN AND OUT rejects BOUDU's most utopian and anarchic moment. At the end of the original film, Boudu literally jumps ship to return to the river and a bum's happy life. The final shots even suggest a kind of carefree lumpensolidarity — a line of bums file past Notre Dame Cathedral singing Boudu's theme song, "Sur les bords de la Seine."^[5]

Like BOB AND CAROL AND TED AND ALICE, Mazursky's first film (1969), DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS deals far more with middle class sexual dilemmas than with conspicuous consumption or class relations. Because DOWN AND OUT defines all problems in sexual, not economic terms, class never really presents a problem. Dressed in an expensive lounging outfit and surrounded by objets d'art, Barb Whiteman explains to Jerry: "I used to go shopping for gratification. But that's like sex without a climax, you know." For Barb, sex, not money, remains the real issue. Jerry the bum has the answer to her needs: he knows the rules better than anyone. A 1980s Lady Chatterley's lover, he gives Barb the climax she's been craving, and he solves all the other family members' problems as well. He brings the gay punk son, Max (Evan Richards), out of the closet, persuades the anorexic daughter to eat, turns the Mexican maid on to Che and Mao, befriends the dog, and eases Dave's guilt at being so rich, all without ever getting at the economic and/or social roots of their or his problems.

Of course BOUDU, like DOWN AND OUT, worries about a decline in masculinity, virility and/or sexuality in the middle classes. M. Lestingois and Dave Whiteman are both wimps. However, the images in DOWN AND OUT insist on the fact, constantly contrasting Richard Dreyfuss' skinny little body with Nick Nolte's hulking frame in medium two shots. In BOUDU, as Janet Walker and Luli McCarroll argue, the middle classes repress sexuality; in DOWN AND OUT, the middle classes extend the range of "tolerable" sexuality. Indeed, because DOWN AND OUT translates all social ills as sexual problems, the film becomes a kind of Freudian "talking cure" for 1980s United States. Going the New Cold War patriarchal family one better, the ending offers us two dads for the price of one: Jerry joins Dave Whiteman as head of the family. Trapped in the narrow hallways of the Lestingois house, Boudu remains a destructive child; in the wide open spaces of the Whiteman mansion, Jerry stays on there as an understanding, tolerant, contented, virile father who knows best.

DOWN AND OUT is so preoccupied with creating one big happy family that it ends up promoting the wealth it sets out to mock.^[6] As in countless other Hollywood films, economic anxiety becomes contained and displaced by an insistence that money isn't everything and that the poor often live happier than the rich.^[7] When Jerry takes Dave to the beach to meet his friends and sing folk songs, they seem

more like Boy Scouts on an overnight or hippies at a hootenanny than impoverished street people. And in this film about poverty and homelessness, only the rich daughter feels hunger. In the present context of world economics, this is absurd. It is funny only to those who do not face need. As one critic writes about Dave Whiteman's boast, "I ate garbage last night, Barb, and I loved it!": "The movie had better find its audience in this country, because no one else in the world would possibly understand it." (Denby, Feb. 3, 1986)

The mystification of poverty which pervades *DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS* functions today to justify right wing domestic policies fueled by the myth of the New Cold War, specifically abolishing welfare programs and instituting a regressive income tax. At the same time, however, it suggests U.S. nostalgia for the economic security of the 60s and 70s. The decision to portray Jerry Baskin as a cultured hippie rather than as a bona fide street person stands as a case in point. Hippies could afford to turn on, tune in and drop out. As the sons and daughters of the middle classes, they posed no real threat to society. "[*DOWN AND OUT*] isn't about the U.S. middle class reaching out to understand something ugly and terrifying, but reaching out to one of its own," comments Tom O'Brien (Ap. 11, 1986). Like many 60s hippies, Jerry returns to his middle class roots, becomes a yuppie, serves as a consultant and, after a feeble attempt at emancipation, returns at the end of the film to drink a cup of Cappuccino with the Whiteman family. Gone is Renoir's fondness for "le gros rouge" (cheap red wine), that mark of proletarian culture and male bonding.

The need for consensus at home thus stands as a major message in *DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS*, and one which marks it as a New Cold War film. Like Jerry the hippie, gay and punk subcultures and a variety of racial subgroups become integrated into the Whiteman family. The working class origins and anti-bourgeois stance of the punks, provocatively analyzed by Dick Hebdige in *Subculture*, become mere fashion statements in *DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS*. Jerry reassures Max about his choice of lipstick: "You can go with more orange, definitely more orange." At the end of the film, Max gets welcomed back into the family fold. His homosexuality seems just a problem of communication, not a real problem, and his punk identity remains coded in consumer terms rather than as social criticism.

Similarly, the film both emphasizes and negates the reality of racial discrimination. It shows racial minorities visible everywhere, and everyone — Blacks, Chicanos, Iranians, Japanese, Chinese — seems happy, healthy and wealthy. The Mexican maid and the Japanese gardener have status as part of the family and enjoy financial success to boot. The maid has her own credit card while the gardener owns a condo in Hawaii. No question of deportation here: these are our aliens. Servants, business associates, workers or friends-everyone loves the Whitemans.

However, the sheer repetition of this cheery message reveals the anxiety which underlies new Cold War rhetoric. The threat posed to U.S. economic dominance by other countries, more overtly acknowledged in a film like *GUNG HO* (Howard: 1986), becomes contained in *DOWN AND OUT* by trotting out earlier myths of racial and cultural assimilation, success and love. The narrative structure depends on Thanksgiving and Christmas, holidays symbolic of U.S. benevolence. A madcap chase scene during the Whiteman's Christmas party even unites everyone — the

family, their black and Iranian neighbors, Japanese friends, a delegation of Chinese industrialists and a Mexican mariachi band — in the swimming pool from which Dave rescued Jerry at the beginning of the film.

The racism which lurks beneath much of *DOWN AND OUT*'s humor does surface abruptly, if briefly, when Dave and Jerry visit Dave's hanger factory in Tiajuana. The sequence begins as a tribute to the wonders of technology: we see machines in close-up magically pump out hangers. Dave explains to Jerry that low cost (i.e. little human labor) means high profits. He boasts that his workers stay happy because he provides such a good health care package, then calls a Mexican worker over and orders him to show his teeth and smile. The image vividly recalls slave markets.

The film depicts bourgeois fears of the working class and lumpen proletariat most obviously, and less mixed up with liberal messages of equality, when the narrative approaches questions of sexuality, health and class. "He might have herpes!" Barb shrills when Dave gives Jerry mouth to mouth resuscitation. Only when Jerry is "made over" does he really exude fitness, and only then can he heal others. The 1980s fear of sexually transmitted diseases did not concern the characters in Renoir's film.

DOWN AND OUT, like *SOUL MAN* (Miner: 1986) and other recent comedies, skillfully combines the 70s message that it is OK to "do your own thing" with a more conservative 80s message that anything goes as long as white male access to social power structures remains guaranteed. By foregrounding sexuality and acknowledging if backpedalling race, class and subcultures, *DOWN AND OUT* speaks to the New Cold War being fought on the U.S. domestic front and with U.S. allies, at the same time that it points to the continuing influence of 60s and 70s countercultures and political movements. Though the film has no allusions to a Soviet threat and virtually no allusions to the seditious seductiveness of Marxist philosophy (aside from the shots of the voluptuous Mexican maid reading Mao), other fears and fantasies of today's resurgent U.S. do occur, among them the challenges of foreign economic competition, the need to stay physically and psychologically in shape, and the continuing dream of the United States as a melting pot where everyone comes out white, male and middle class.

Nonetheless, through its tolerance of deviant subcultures *DOWN AND OUT* goes far beyond what the rightwing proponents of a New Cold War ideology would ever accept. By diluting the purity of the New Cold War myth, *DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS* broadens its appeal at the same time that it guts the politics of the countercultural and/or subcultural ideologies on which it also draws. In this film, opportunities for audience identification with and distance from both the narrative and the images are multiple and complex. With such a mixed bag of tricks, small wonder that *DOWN AND OUT* has enjoyed such box office success, while *BOUDU* provoked a riot at its premiere and closed after only three days (Sensonske, Martin).

PATRIARCHS MEET PUNKS: *ROCKY IV* AND FOREIGN WAR

Unlike *DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS*, *ROCKY IV* is instantly identifiable as a New Cold War film. The plot blatantly pits Us against Them, the U.S. against the U.S.S.R.. It incarnates in the bulky shapes of Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone)

and Ivan Drago (Doiph Lundgren) the New Cold War tenet that an increasingly ominous Soviet presence threatens U.S. economic and political interests. Like *DOWN AND OUT*, *ROCKY IV* weaves domestic issues relating to the family, gender roles, race and subcultures in with an obvious obsession with foreign policy. More than *DOWN AND OUT*, though, the film tries, in Andrew Britton's terms, to "mandate ... choral support" from the audience, to unite a wide variety of subgroups in support of its basically ultra-right wing message.

Yet because the film tackles so much within the simplistic framework of the highly formulaic Rocky series, contradictions occasionally emerge to fissure its conservative message. Tania Modleski has claimed that open-endedness and an absence of plot and character development in recent formula and genre films inhibit audience identification and jeopardize the construction of the bourgeois ego. Such a claim may or may not hold true for the diverse audiences of the Rocky films; clearly, *ROCKY IV* flouts audience expectations as much as it fulfills them. Audiences think they know what they will get from a film labelled *ROCKY IV*, both because it is a sequel and because it so obviously fits into the action-adventure genre. Viewers pay for a story and pictures which will once again demonstrate Rocky's macho prowess.^[8] But *ROCKY IV* deviates in certain key ways from the rest of the series. Unlike in the other films, narrative tension here centers on Rocky's fear of weakness and aging. The plot is more overtly political, with the training and fight sequences set in Russia. And Rocky's opponent is white, not black. Although *ROCKY III* also asks whether Rocky still "has the eye of the tiger," the question there is phrased in personal, not national or international terms. In *ROCKY IV*, in contrast, conservative phobias vie with conservative fantasies for screen time.

In *ROCKY IV*, Rocky Balboa, archetypal explorer, retraces his steps, going from the New World to the Old. He returns to the ring in Russia on Christmas day to avenge the death of his best friend, Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers) at the hands of Soviet superhero Ivan Drago. As in *DOWN AND OUT* but far more paradoxically so, the film once again invokes the myth of Christmas as the holiday of peace and harmony, now to disguise U.S. aggression. Throughout the film, the cultural and political differences between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. are emphasized and exaggerated. As in all the Rocky films, *ROCKY IV* begins with a fight sequence, but here it looks stylized and abstract, a series of extreme close-ups of a red, white and blue boxing glove pounding into and then in slow motion pulverizing a red glove decorated with a yellow hammer and sickle. Later lengthy parallel-editing sequences show Rocky training in Siberian ice and snow, running up mountains, chopping wood and lifting his friends on his back while Drago receives steroid injections and works out in a Moscow gym equipped with the latest body-building machines. Newspaper and magazine headlines, TV news commentaries, and real-life sports commentators like Warner Wolf are interwoven in the film narrative to document the authenticity of the final fictional battle. In this way the narrative simultaneously acknowledges, frames and subsumes history and reality.

The outcome of the final battle never remains in doubt. While Rocky and Apollo fought to a draw in *ROCKY*, the first film in the series (Avildsen: 1976), Rocky has won every fight since: first against Apollo in *ROCKY II* (Stallone: 1979), then against Clubber Lang (Mr. 1) in *ROCKY III* (Stallone: 1982). Both audiences and critics recognize Rocky's mythic qualities. He represents the U.S. dream that, with

hard work, courage and faith, a working class ethnic man can make good, especially in the realms of sports or entertainment.

But ROCKY IV represents a significant departure from the rest of the series' emphasis on class, race and upward mobility. The original film is typical of an early 70s variant of success-myth films in which, as Chuck Kleinhans puts it, the working-class origins [of the heroes] are central to the narrative." ROCKY IV combines Rocky's traditionally-based persona with that of the New Cold War hero, Rambo. Gone are the long shots of the first film which anchor Rocky in the space and time of mid 70s Philadelphia working class neighborhoods. Gone too, the comparatively rich dialogue and the portrayal of Rocky and his pals as losers. Like the characters portrayed by Clint Eastwood, Arnold Schwarzenegger/ and Chuck Norris, Stallone's fourth Rocky and his Rambo represent tough, invincible warriors, always ready to fight the good fight though they have almost nothing to say about it. Apollo's almost monosyllabic eloquence before his exhibition bout with Drago sums up the film's message. As the sound track from Rocky blares in the background, Apollo tells Rocky,

"You can't change what you really are. We have to be right in the middle of the action 'cuz we the warriors. And without some damn war to fight...."

Spectacle is more important than speech in the actionadventure genre as a whole, it is true. But in referring to this film even more than to the other ROCKY films, critics overwhelmingly labeled ROCKY a cartoon or comic strip character, so devoid do his actions seem of psychological motivation (Goldman; Kroll; Denby, Dec. 12,86; Schickel, Dec. 9, 1986). Rather than articulate New Cold War concerns, Rocky embodies them. "I just gotta do what I gotta do," he tells Adrian.

Worries about the shape and status of the male body replace class, sex and even romance as major narrative concerns. In ROCKY IV, Rocky's body and the body politic become presented as identical, while Rocky's more important fight is internal, not external. In true 80s rightwing fashion, discipline and freedom are presented as two sides of the same coin, with individualism (good) pitted against self-indulgence (bad). (Wolfe) The real narrative crisis thus occurs towards the middle of the film and not during the final fight scene, as Rocky wonders whether he should or could fight again.

A montage of clips from the earlier films, slow-motion shots of the Drago/Apollo fight, and close-ups of Rocky in his car are coupled with pounding rock lyrics. The images clearly label his earlier victories as past, while the words of the song stress his present dilemma: "There's no easy way out. There's no short cut home. There's no easy way out. Giving in can be wrong."

The sounds of rock 'n roll and the rhythmic editing of music videos replace the religious iconography of the earlier films, and offer hope of Rocky's rejuvenation if not resurrection. Pre-fight Soviet rhetoric plays on U.S. fears of inadequacy. "The defeat of this little champ [Rocky] will be a perfect example of how pathetically weak your society has become," says the chief Soviet trainer at a press conference. In response, the training sequences repetitively display Stallone's muscular body as tauter and leaner than ever before while the narrative describes Rocky's regimen as a return to nature and pioneer values. The film uses conventional, ideologically

coded and ideologically loaded rites of purification which the warrior hero must undergo. In this way, New Cold War rhetoric becomes fused with macho anxieties and earlier U.S. myths.

Like *DOWN AND OUT*, *ROCKY IV* seemingly associates weakness with capitalist accumulation. The film contains this weakness by proposing yuppies as a kind of effete, emasculated, pseudo-class, unworthy of organized opposition. Ultimately both films condone and promote materialism. "This house, the cars and all the stuff we've got, that ain't everything," Rocky explains to Adrian, echoing her admonitions to him in *ROCKY III*. To prove his sincerity, he temporarily and rhetorically gives up all his wealth and thereby proves he is worthy of it. Fond of dichotomy, like all action/adventure films, *ROCKY IV* posits a world where punks square off against yuppies. Like many other recent genre movies — *HIGHLANDER* (Mulcahy:1986), *THE TERMINATOR* (Cameron: 1984) and *BLADERUNNER* (Scott: 1982) to name just three — *ROCKY IV* employs the punk subculture's insistence on visual style for its own narrative and spectacular ends. The bad guys, Drago and his Russian wife, Ludmilla (Brigitte Nielsen), are costumed as punks. They have short, spikey hair cuts, they wear fashionably chic punk clothes with padded shoulders, and Ludmilla wears two earrings on one ear. Extreme low angle close-ups position Drago as a monster, while medium shots and long shots stress his enormous size and suggest he is part man, part machine.

The negative characteristics of late capitalism in the United States simply become displaced on to a visibly different, threatening Other.^[10] The film's paranoid insistence on dichotomy denies the complexity and fragmentation of social life in advanced capitalist countries. Instead the oppositions between yuppies and punks become, to quote Fredric Jameson, "a privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control too difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp." The casting of tall, blond Scandinavians — ideal Aryan *übermenschen* — as Russians collapses history still further. In *ROCKY IV*'s visual logic, Reds equal Nazis.

So much does the film rely on dualism that it has room for only one enemy. All subgroups and subcultures except punks rally to Rocky's side. As in *DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS*, not only women and children but even blacks become part of the big happy U.S. family which Rocky heads, though here domestic affairs play second fiddle to foreign policy.

Nowhere does this become more apparent than in the film's portrayal of blacks. Unlike all the other *ROCKY* films and even more than in *DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS*, race does not pose a problem in *ROCKY IV*. Apollo eagerly enlists in the New Cold War, responding to Drago's challenge when Rocky turns it down. Apollo's Las Vegas exhibition bout with Drago is a masterpiece of spectacle, shot in reds, whites and blues and replete with dancing girls, fireworks and rock music. Mr. Soul himself,

James Brown, belts out "Livin' in America" as Apollo prances out, dressed in his Uncle Sam costume from *ROCKY II*. The more blatant racism of the earlier films surfaces only in Apollo's cocky lack of preparation and prefight macho posturing. Because in this film Apollo acts both foolishly and bravely, blacks and whites in the audience can mourn his death with Rocky and vow a common vengeance. At the same time the story line absolves whites and Rocky of guilt since the underlying

message remains: Apollo deserved to die because he was unprepared and weak.

As for women, all the ROCKY films assign them roles only within in the context of the family — as wives, sisters and mothers. ROCKY IV adds to traditional family values an ideological agenda. The family becomes just another sports arena for broadcasting New Cold War messages, and politics replace relationships and romance. "I fight so you don't have to fight," Rocky tells his son. The interactions between Rocky and Adrian, a prime focus of the first film and still important in the second and third, here recede into the background. While Adrian initially shows great concern for Rocky's welfare, ultimately she realizes her country's honor is at stake and joins her husband as he trains in Russia.

Reaction shots of Adrian, Ludmilla and Apollo's wife pepper the fight sequences. The way Ludmilla is filmed adds a layer of ambiguity to the film's clear-cut ideological message. The film shows her far more often in close-up and extreme close-up than Adrian; she looks far more glamorous and exotic; and she has the larger speaking role. Indeed, she speaks for her man, who thereby loses a degree of male power. For women in the audience, the conflict between spectacle and narrative — the one favoring the villainness, the other the heroine — offers a choice of female characters with whom to identify, at the partial expense of ideological unity.

Thanks to the multiple ideological concerns ROCKY IV contains within its formulaic narrative, Rocky's final victory pleases everyone. Small wonder that almost half the audience for ROCKY IV is over 25 and almost half is female (Goldman). Part of the film's charm derives from its predictability.^[11] By round fifteen, blacks and whites, young and old, women and men, yuppies and punks in the movie theater all chant "Rocky! Rocky! Rocky! Rocky!" along with the Russians in the film. The decibel level of their enthusiasm exceeds that of all the earlier films. Even Drago finally adopts U.S. values and asserts himself as an antiauthoritarian, individualist punk. "I fight to win — for me!" he bellows at the KGB agent who has been berating him, then throws the agent bodily out of the ring.

Constantly shifting camera set-ups, reaction shots, camera angles and pans draw everyone into the action. Rocky's final victory speech has a brilliant incoherence, managing to appeal to pacifists and Cold War advocates alike. His words reflect the average U.S. citizen's mistrust of government bureaucracy and fear of nuclear war. At the same time, the images offer us the satisfaction of knowing that David can beat Goliath. With elaborate and inarticulate pauses, panting all the while, Rocky says:

"Thank you. I came here tonight and I didn't know what to expect. I seen a lot of people hatin' me and I didn't know what to feel about that so I guess I didn't like you much none either. During this fight I seen a lot of changin'. The way u'se felt about me and the way I felt about you. In here there were two guys kiln' each other, but I guess that's better than 20 million. What I'm tryin' to say is, that if I can change and you can change, everybody can change!"

Even the Politburo must stand and cheer. The United States is not only resurgent, it is victorious. Humanism and aggression stand side by side in this closing

sequence, just as they do in the rhetoric of the New Cold War. History becomes collapsed. ROCKY replaces the casualty figures of nuclear annihilation with the 20 million dead of the Second World War. The film delivers its good-will Christmas message of hope on U.S. terms, but it masks those terms by ending as it began, with the nuclear family. In this way, Rocky's last words and the film's images echo those of ROCKY II. But now Rocky's message of love goes out to his son, not to Adrian, as the boy sits at home in front of the TV: "I just want to say one thing to my kid who should be home sleepin'. Merry Christmas, kid! I love you!"

As in DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS, the final emphasis shifts from the specific problems of New Cold War U.S.A. to enduring patriarchal power. But new subcultures and subgroups have been integrated into the family, distorting and reinforcing the New Cold War ideology predicated on those values. Personal history replaces international history, and the way is paved for sequels to come.

FEMINISM MEETS IMPERIALISM: *ALIENS* AND NEW COLD WAR IN SPACE

ALIENS similarly embeds its references to current foreign policy concerns within the nuclear family. But here, unlike ROCKY IV, DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS and most other New Cold War films, the hero is a woman, albeit one with an androgynous name: Ripley (Sigourney Weaver). In the context of an action-adventure cum science fiction cum horror film like *ALIENS*, the presence of a central female character who emerges successful and strong is exceptional. The switch from male to female hero indicates the extent to which feminism has infiltrated film and changed daily life.

At the same time, Ripley remains a token. Her status as hero focuses attention on sex roles at the expense of international — in this case, intergalactic — politics. Indeed, the film's strategy could be defined as a perverse reversal of the early 1970s feminist maxim, "the personal is political." In *ALIENS*, even more than in DOWN AND OUT and ROCKY IV, the political becomes rewritten as and restricted to the personal. With the exception of the sound track, every aspect of the film, from the mise-en-scene to the plot to the characters, remains tied to female sexuality, which in turn becomes defined via motherhood.

In actuality *ALIENS*' storyline rests on the premise of a foreign threat to U.S. imperialist economic interests far more openly than DOWN AND OUT does and far more ominously than ROCKY IV. It also critiques, as the original *ALIEN* (Scott: 1979) also does, these interests' callous inhumanity. In *ALIEN*, however, this inhumanity grounds the entire film. Big business (the Company) and technology (the ship's computer and the robot/scientist) seem allied as much if not more against the crew members themselves, who are slated to die, as against the aliens, who will merely be captured and brought back to the United States. Thus, while female sexuality remains a major concern in *ALIEN*, the film deals with other issues.^[12] In *ALIENS*, in contrast, the overt political overtones of the film's beginning recede into the background and become subplots as soon as Ripley and the Marines leave the earth. Big business less obviously represents the bad guy because audience antipathy stays focused on a single individual, Carter Burke (Paul Reiser), the yuppie company representative.^[13] The sequel also vindicates technology. The robot, Bishop, (Lance Henriksen) initially an object of fear, becomes a hero, more "human" than the space ships and the advanced weapons systems but just as synonymous with progress.

ALIENS begins where ALIEN left off, with Ripley and her cat deep in hypersleep somewhere in outer space. On her return to earth 57 years later, Ripley confronts the same profit-hungry corporation which in the first film engineered the destruction of her ship and crew. Despite her protests, a new generation of corporate executives perfunctorily terminates the investigation of the earlier disaster. But when an entire colony of U.S. settlers on a remote planet is mysteriously wiped out, the company turns to Ripley for help. After much debate, Burke persuades her to accompany him and a Marine rescue force as an advisor.

When Ripley, Burke and the Marines arrive at the colony, they discover a waif-like little girl nicknamed Newt (Carrie Henn). She alone has evaded the aliens by hiding in the air and heating ducts of the settlers' bioworld. Ripley feels a kinship with Newt, the only other person to have experienced and survived an alien attack. Their relationship quickly deepens. In shot/reverse shots, close-ups and medium two-shots, the film chronicles an awakening mother/daughter bond between the two. As the aliens come ever closer, Ripley repeatedly risks her own life to save Newt. The most dramatic example of motherly self-sacrifice occurs near the end of the film. Even though the planet is about to explode, Ripley returns, alone but armed with every weapon in the Marine arsenal, to rescue Newt from the clutches of the giant serpent-like mother alien. She sets the alien's eggs on fire and wisks Newt back to the space ship/ womb just in time.

In ALIEN Ripley's maternal qualities are suggested only by her love for her cat, Jonesy. In ALIENS, in contrast, Ripley incarnates heroism and motherhood for both ultraconservatives and feminists. Her devotion to her child has clear appeal to rightwing proponents of traditional sexual politics at the same time as her independence, autonomy and androgyny fly in the face of conservative ideas of what a woman is and should be. Feminists, on the other hand, champion Ripley because she stands on her own two feet, yet does not hesitate to care. Also, she successfully combines blue-collar and managerial skills (she works as a loader before becoming a military advisor). By going it alone, against gender stereotypes and all odds, Ripley proves single mothers can be successful parents.

This brings a welcome change from the nurturing male single parent movies of the late 70s and early 80s like KRAMER VS. KRAMER (Benton:1979), MR. MOM (Dragoti:1983) and even BEYOND THE THUNDERDOME (Miller: 1985). Like Mad Max, Ripley is not just a single parent, she is also a child finder — a quintessentially 1980s concern. She seems more adept than either Kramer, Mr. Mom or Mad Max at juggling the dual pressures of work and family which confront and tantalize the majority of women, not just feminists, in the 1980s. Anxious to improve their economic status while often still wanting traditional female roles as mothers and/or wives, women today must more than ever negotiate and resolve societal contradictions within their personal lives. They often have educational preparation and high expectations, but affirmative action has failed them, social services have been gutted, and pay inequities continue unabated. By identifying with Ripley, women find not only hope for success, but also, consciously or unconsciously, the satisfaction of vengeance.

As a character Ripley is assigned phallic attributes at the same time as she is clearly marked as heterosexual. The narrative hints at a romance between her and Hicks, the nicest male Marine (Michael Biehn).^[14] In ALIENS as in ALIEN, she

periodically functions as a reassuring female fetish object.. In her underwear, as Barbara Creed notes, her "body is pleasurable and reassuring to look at. She signifies the 'acceptable' form and shape of woman." Most of the time, however, Ripley wears baggy clothing and moves assertively. When she climbs into her loader machine to fight the mother alien, all her femininity disappears: she becomes a man. One of ALIENS' mixed messages is thus very similar to the messages of DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS and ROCKY IV. To act, one must have muscles and one must, if not be a man, at least masquerade as a man. In fact, several critics have referred to Ripley as "Rambolina" (Kopkind, Korpivaara, Crouchet, Small, Kael). On some level, all three films encapsulate what women and men of the 1980s know: society still defines success in male terms.

The film similarly incorporates ambiguous portrayals of the secondary female characters. The depiction of Vasquez (Jenette Goldstein), a career soldier who out-machos everyone, offers the clearest example of the film's play with sexual politics. "Hey, Vasquez, have you ever been mistaken for a man?" a male Marine asks as she effortlessly executes a series of overhand chin-ups. "No, have you?" she replies. Throughout the film she not only defies sex roles, she also challenges the definition of female sexuality as heterosexuality. With her muscles, her red bandana and her aggressive stance, Goldstein plays the character as dyke, Latin American revolutionary, and U.S. career soldier rolled into one. The narrative insists on Vasquez' heroism. Like Apollo in ROCKY IV, she volunteers for the toughest assignments, and at the end she resolutely sacrifices herself for her comrades and her country. Nowhere does ALIENS mention the possibility of a direct bonding between women other than that between mother and daughter. What "bonding" exists between Ripley and Vasquez is mediated through nationality. They are on the same side in an imperialist war, not sisters or lovers. Because the film hints that Vasquez is gay but emphasizes her courage, the character appeals to a wide spectrum of audience members, from radical lesbians to arch conservatives.

On the whole ALIENS is more concerned with the traditional female body than with androgynous or masculine female bodies. Women are linked with reproduction, sexuality and carnality throughout the film. These associations become most obvious when projected onto the aliens or transposed to the background sets. In ALIEN the enemy "mother" is the ship's computer, not a female creature. There the mise-en-scene betrays the film's preoccupation with the riddle of femininity more than the design of the monsters does. They look like sexless blobs. In the attack on the near naked Ripley at the end of the movie, they become male rapists. In ALIENS, in contrast, the monsters are insects, ruled over by a queen. As Penelope Tarratt notes in "Monsters from the Id," science fiction films often couple insect fear with a dread of the phallic mother as they reenact repressed sexual desires.

Ripley wreaks vengeance against a creature distinctly coded in terms of male-defined femininity. The alien mother's snarling mouth represents a veritable vagina dentata. Feminists may interpret this bad mother in terms of rightwing women who live to breed and to attack others who do not share their reproductive agenda.^[15] Such an interpretation is possible given the film's feminist leanings. However, the overriding effect of the alien queen's portrayal as a "single mother" is to displace and subsume women's rebellion against patriarchal power structures and men onto an archetypal myth of Woman, and to direct women viewers' anger

against other women. Seen in this light, Ripley's killing of the alien queen appeals to men as much if not more than it appeals to women, for by it Ripley protects men from their dread of women.[\[16\]](#)

In the final analysis, *ALIENS*' ideological slipperiness stems less from its blend of misogyny and feminism than from its combining these traits with militarism and imperialism. The film hides international politics behind personal and family politics more skillfully than either *DOWN AND OUT* or *ROCKY IV* do. Not surprisingly, critics ignore *ALIENS*' militaristic and imperialist premises while discussing or at least mentioning such premises in reviews of other science fiction and adventure films, whether *Rocky IV*, *RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK* (Spielberg:1981) or *STAR WARS* (Lucas: 1977). Critics may debate *ALIENS*' attitudes towards women and Woman, but the right of Ripley, the U.S. Marines and the "terraformers" to occupy and colonize another world goes largely unquestioned (Kopkind; Creed; Ansen; OToole; Schickel, July 28, 1986).

In many ways *ALIENS* has a far more bellicose narrative than either *DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS* or *ROCKY IV*. Sexuality, war and colonization constantly overlap, especially in the substrata of the film. The sets (the space ships and the artificially constructed, selfcontained world of the colonists) resemble wombs, as they did in *ALIEN* (Creed, 1986). More overtly than in *ALIEN*, they also evoke colonialism and the jungles of Vietnam. The artificial bio-world of the settlers is dark, shot in blues and greys, claustrophobic, full of tunnels and pipes, hot and often steamy. With their guns pointing out in front of them, the Marines seem like penises impregnating the colony, sperm searching for alien eggs, and warriors seeking to protect imperialist interests by destroying the enemy. The portrayal of the aliens also links sexuality and war. Their unexpected and violent emergence from their victims' stomachs suggests a combined fantasy of how babies are born, invasion and occupation all at once. The incredibly rapid growth of these "babies," their tails and the sticky white secretions they leave behind suggest erections, penises and ejaculation while also inscribing right wing fears of widespread and uncontrollable popular uprisings.

As in *DOWN AND OUT* and *ROCKY IV*, domestic and foreign policy issues become tightly entwined. Once again, a Hollywood film mobilizes women, blacks, Latinos, proletarians and punks in support of colonialism and imperialism. The multi-racial mix of the Marines recalls the extended family in *DOWN AND OUT* and the united front of blacks and whites in *ROCKY IV*. Everyone functions in peak physical shape, with the exception of Burke, who looks flat-chested and thin. But as with *ROCKY IV*'s emphasis on training and fitness, *ALIENS*' insistence on bodybuilding betrays the United States' anxiety that, as in Beirut and Vietnam, it will once again be caught off guard or found unprepared. Fear of contagion by AIDS-like diseases replaces fear of aging or weakness, perhaps because *ALIENS* deals with colonialism (Kopkind).[\[17\]](#) As Edward Said notes, the association of the colonial other with disease, insanity and sexuality typifies colonial discourse.

As in other New Cold War films, the film invokes the iconography of yuppie and punk subcultures to create a world of clear-cut binary oppositions. But while in *ROCKY IV* "yuppie" signified weakness to overcome, here it signifies cowardice and treachery to wipe out. Burke, the yuppie, becomes the depository of the negative characteristics of U.S. imperialism, much as Drago and Ludmilla, the punks, do in

ROCKY IV. In ALIENS the underlying binary structures simply become reversed. The film valorizes punks; here, the Marines, not the Russians, sport spike haircuts, chains and black fingerless gloves.

Lighting, camera angle and movement, editing, music and ambient sound all encourage and reinforce jingoist audience identification with Ripley and the Marines as good Americans. Flares and napalm blasts provide bursts of white, while reds and blues flood the screen during moments of crisis. Low angle shots, a constantly moving camera and rapid editing leave little time for thought. As in THE TERMINATOR, Cameron's first film, another ominous surprise awaits just around the corner. Drums, gunfire, explosions, screams and yells echo, conveying a sense of urgency and danger.

Allusions to other war films and references to U.S. military involvement in Vietnam and Cambodia, absent from ALIEN, permeate ALIENS. A scene reminiscent of THE DEER HUNTER (Cimino: 1978) evokes the U.S. soldiers' boredom and jaded search for thrills in Vietnam. For example, as lunchtime entertainment, the robot "Bishop" stabs a knife between the outstretched fingers of a Marine's hand. ALIENS' characterization of the Marines as insubordinate, combat-wise troops led by an incompetent lieutenant replays a cliché found in Vietnam war films from APOCALYPSE NOW (Coppola: 1979) to FULL METAL JACKET (Kubrick: 1987) and PLATOON (Stone: 1987). Here the lieutenant's refusal to let the Marines stalking the aliens fire because they are under a nuclear reactor recalls not only the field experiences of Marines in Vietnam but also the helplessness of the Marines in Beirut. And the hurried departure of Ripley, Newt, Hicks and Bishop in the space shuttle calls to mind the last minute airlifts from both Saigon and Phnom Penh.

ALIENS goes far beyond other, more realist, war films. Because it blends science fiction, action-adventure and horror genres, fantasies replace facts and outweigh fears. The film tells us that not only can the United States win imperialist wars but even survive nuclear ones. In this film, conventional weapons prove insufficient, as in Vietnam, but in space nuclear weapons presumably can function safely and successfully. The film conveys none of the terror of nuclear annihilation which permeated science fiction movies of the 1950s. When only Burke's voice urges restraint, to nuke or not to nuke never even becomes a question.

ALIENS' conclusion, like that of countless other New Cold War films, evades facing societal and political problems by apparently returning to traditional values. "I like to think the real message [of ALIENS] is love," Sigourney Weaver has said (Schickel, July 28, 1986). The film's final sequence recalls those of DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS and ROCKY IV. Ripley tucks Newt into her sleeping pod, and assures the girl that at last it's, "safe to dream." Their mother/daughter relationship ensures imperialism's continuation, just as the father/son relationship does in ROCKY IV. To depict Ripley as nurturer justifies and masks the film's violence and promotes a New Cold War characterization of U.S. foreign policy as defensive, not aggressive.

Contradictions inevitably remain. In many ways they become heightened because, unlike ROCKY IV or DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS, ALIENS takes the economic and political gains of an oppositional movement — the women's movement — as its *raison d'être*. The portrayal of Ripley and Vasquez as strong, independent, likeable women warriors threatens the patriarchal values on which

New Cold War ideology relies even as the film collapses feminism into imperialism. ALIENS does use many stereotypical images of women as mothers, daughters, bitches and bull dykes. But for all its fondness for convention, it acknowledges that motherhood has changed, and that women's identities and roles have multiplied. In this film as in society, victory in Vietnam is patently a fiction; single, working women are demonstrably a fact. The dread and the desires attaching to women and to war operate here on different registers. ALIENS' mass appeal — and its subversive potential — lie in the gaps and bridges it creates and negotiates between the two levels.

CONCLUSION

Because they belong to different genres, DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS, ROCKY IV and ALIENS seem to address different questions and to work in different ways. Closer examination reveals the films have much in common. All three employ, promote, dilute and dissolve a New Cold War ideology specific to the United States of the late 70s to late 80s, an ideology absent from the original film or the preceding films in the series. All three replace the political with the personal, rewrite economic concerns as sexual problems, and end by returning to tradition. Drawing on earlier romance and success myths, all three films disguise military aggression as nurturance and love, even as they dramatize the need for domestic unity in the face of external threat.

But the fact that these films promote nationalism, patriarchy and imperialism ultimately means less than their obsessive organization of current fears and fantasies surrounding sexual, racial, subcultural and class difference. Contradictions constantly emerge which point up ambivalences in New Cold War ideology itself, perched precariously as it is between conservatism and liberalism, the old and the new. Because the films attempt not only to address but also to entertain a variety of subgroups and subcultures in their intended audience, they undercut and extend rightwing ideology. In particular, the films incorporate references to oppositional movements of the 1960s, 70s and 80s and construct alternative points of identification. When DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS, ROCKY IV, ALIENS and films like them include blacks, gays, lesbians, punks, Mexicans, Japanese, and other subgroups within the traditional nuclear family, when they promote working mothers as single heads of household, and acknowledge or even excuse male insecurities, they dilute and occasionally undermine the purity of New Cold War rhetoric.

The very effort these films make to transcribe and channel current social contexts so as to ensure a unified audience response betrays the existence of multiple audience responses, and hints at the continuing appeal of progressive political movements. In the final analysis, the mixed ideological messages and confused styles of address characteristic of DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS, ROCKY IV and ALIENS demonstrate that subgroups and subcultures have become more, not less important in today's film audiences and in society as a whole. There are several "correct" responses to these films, and these responses are anticipated by the film text and in excesses that point beyond the text.

These films do not merely bracket reality by solipsistically referring to themselves and other media products, as Andrew Britton argues. They do not merely construct entertainment as separate from and in opposition to life. Britton's concentration on

the film texts he analyzes works against his exploring how audiences use these texts, and his methodology blinds him to the contradictions contained within the films. Looked at from the point of view of the audience, the very category "entertainment" proves more complicated than critics usually acknowledge. Since individual audience members have different relations to labor, gender, sexuality, race and subcultures, viewers also have different relations to, expectations of, and uses for entertainment.^[16] As Gina Marchetti argues with reference to the functioning of class and ideology in *THE A-TEAM*, popular films like these address, subsume and reconcile audience differences in order to make money, yet the contradictions they raise cannot be completely contained. Rather than emphasize, as Britton does, the monolithic pervasiveness of "Reaganite" or New Cold War ideology in today's film texts, we should, to quote James Collins,

"take into account the centring power of individual discourses, [and] the power of individuals to make choices regarding those discourses. While a unitary culture may have disappeared, unitary discourses constructing very specific subjects have only intensified."

Marxist and feminist mass media critics face a difficult task. How do we map the intersections, overlays and divergences among mass culture, dominant ideologies, representation and history, while neither denying nor oversimplifying the category of the subject? I would maintain it is too soon to characterize and categorize the relations between today's popular films and society as fixed, or to view a priori any form of popular culture as "bad" and manipulative. To do so means ignoring points of opposition and vulnerability which inevitably exist within, and despite, dominant discourses. Instead, as Dana Polan suggests, we should engage in an ongoing analysis which studies individual texts within their larger intertextuality, and within the overall operations of capitalism today. In this spirit I have analyzed New Cold War ideology in *DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS*, *ROCKY IV* and *ALIENS*. I secretly hope, of course, that in sequels and remakes to come, aliens will populate Beverly Hills and cheer as Ripley razes Rocky.

Notes and bibliography continued on [page 2](#)

New Cold War sequels and remakes

page 2

from *Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, pp. 85-96

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1990, 2006

NOTES

1. Britton's pessimistic view of contemporary popular films is typical of much Marxist postmodernist criticism where the high modernist novel or the classic Hollywood film are taken as models and norms. See, for example, Jameson.

Recently, of course, critics of postmodern mass media have begun to recognize that individual audience members and subgroups within film audiences can and do resist dominant ideological messages, even while consuming and/or enjoying them. See, for example, Collins and essays in Modleski, ed..

2. Noam Chomsky gives a more detailed description of the New Cold War's many manifestations and consequences today.

3. Faulkner perceptively argues, however, that while *BOUDU* is a film about class difference, it is not a film about class conflict. He categorizes the film's humor as, in Roland Barthes' terms, "inoculative" rather than subversive, maintaining that Renoir never identifies or accuses the economic structures on which bourgeois cultural hegemony rest.

4. For an analysis of sexuality, class and feminism in an earlier Disney film, see my article on *THE NORTH AVENUE IRREGULARS* (dir. Bilson, 1979).

5. In ending with the tramp's successful conversion to a bourgeois, Mazursky's film is far more faithful to the original play by Rene Fauchois than Renoir's *BOUDU*. See Sesonske, Faulkner for discussions of the shifts between Renoir's film and Fauchois' play.

6. The banality and gentility of Mazursky's critique of the dominant organization of gender, sexuality and class become obvious when compared with John Water's acerbic send up of Baltimore's lower middle classes in *POLYESTER* (1979).

7. See Robin Woods' article, "Ideology, Genre, Auteur," for a list of values and assumptions of U.S. capitalist ideology which pervade classic Hollywood film. More specifically, *DOWN AND OUT IN BEVERLY HILLS* participates in what Chuck Kleinhans calls "the sophisticated or ironic success myth in which the price of material success is shown to be spiritual and social emptiness. We could call this the bourgeois failure myth, or the sour-grapes version of the naive success myth."

8. Stallone's reliance on New Cold War ideology is especially blatant in RAMBO III. Set in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan, RAMBO III bombed at the box office, in good part because it was released shortly after the Soviets announced they were withdrawing troops and ultimately pulling out of the country.

9. In contrast, few audience members of DOWN AND OUT realize it is based on an earlier French film. Jameson stated (1984) that remakes as remakes provide us with a kind of "pseudo-historical depth" as "the history of aesthetic styles displaces real history." This needs nuancing in the case of DOWN AND OUT. Any connotation of "pasness" predicated on intertextuality is on the whole lost on the viewing public because the original is an older, foreign, film.

10. Indeed, in a *People* magazine interview (Jerome), Stallone speaks of Drago in the way that Europeans, Third World peoples and even many U.S. citizens would speak of the United States: "Drago represents technology, big business, machines, and international politics."

11. Britton maintains that predictability is the main source of pleasure in 80s films. While this may be true of the ROCKY films and other blatantly New Cold War films, he fails to account for the widespread distribution and popular success of films which are considerably more ideologically volatile, like Susan Seidelman's DESPERATELY SEEKING SUSAN (1984).

12. Barbara Creed's article, "Horror and the Monstrous Feminine," (1986) is typical of the tendency in feminist criticism to focus on gender and sexuality at the expense of race and imperialism. Creed reads ALIEN against Kristeva's theories of abjection. She argues that ALIEN in particular and horror films in general inscribe both an archaic mother (here: the womb/the black hole) and a phallic mother (here: the aliens). Her analysis is fruitful but limited to analyzing "a complex representation of the monstrous-feminine in terms of the maternal figure as perceived within a patriarchal ideology."

13. As Jim Naureckas notes in his review of the film, the reference to Carter is significant: "[Burke's] unusual first name may be taken as a swipe at detente — he wants to profit from the Aliens, not destroy them." See also Ernest Larsen in a similar discussion of the corporation's control over the first ALIEN spaceship crew.

14. Hicks is in fact the only man to survive, albeit thanks to Ripley and blinded in one eye (castrated).

15. An example is Margaret Atwood's depiction of ruling class women in the feminist dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale*.

16. Few reviewers except Naureckas acknowledge ALIENS' appeals to a male fear of women, preferring to concentrate on Ripley's feminism. For the original psychoanalytic analysis, see Karen Horney.

17. The same fear of sexually transmitted diseases appears in WITCHES OF EASTWICK (Miller: 1987) where for the first time a heroine suffers from herpes.

18. Kleinhans concludes "Working Class Heroes" with a similar observation: "When we talk about film audience we always mean an aggregate of various

audiences, which can be described by distinguishing their nationality, language, sex, class, race, religion, age, occupation or political views. In other words, there is never a homogeneous audience for a Hollywood film."

John Fiske argues that audience identification with elements of popular TV shows occurs not between the individual viewer and one or more of the characters, but at the level of the discursive structures of the TV text. Such an understanding of identification "recognizes that [the] play of similarity and difference along the axes of nation, race, class, gender, power, work, etc. [in the text] fits with the discursive structure of the reading subject."

REFERENCES

Ansen, David, "Terminating the Aliens," *Newsweek* 108.3 (July 21, 1986)

Atwood, Margaret, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986)

Britton, Andrew, "Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment," *Movie* 31-32 (Winter 1986)

Chomsky, Noam, *Towards a New Cold War: Essays on the Current Crisis and How We Got There* (New York: Pantheon, 1982)

Collins, James, "Postmodernism and Cultural Practice: Redefining the Parameters," *Screen* 28.2 (Spring 1987)

Corliss, Rich, "Sugary Satire," *Time* 27.4 (January 27, 1986)

Creed, Barbara, "From Here to Modernity: Feminism and Postmodernism," *Screen* 28.2 (Spring 1987)

Creed, Barbara, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," *Screen* 27.1 (January-February 1986)

Crouchet, Bruce, "ALIENS," *Cinefantastique* 16.3 (July 1986)

Denby, David, "Angst at the Top," *New York* 19.5 (February 3, 1986)

Denby, David, "Cartoon God, Fallen Idol," *New York* 18.48 (December 9, 1985)

Faulkner, Christopher, *The Social Cinema of Jean Renoir* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986)

Fiske, John, *Television Culture* (London: Methuen, 1987)

Goldman, Peter, "ROCKY and RAMBO," *Newsweek* 106.26 (December 23, 1985)

Grant, Barry, ed., *Film Genre Reader* (Austin: Univ. of TX, 1986)

Hebdige, Dick, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979)

Holmiund, Christine, "Tots to Tanks: Walt Disney Presents Feminism for the Family," *Social Text* 1.2 (Summer 1979)

- Horney, Karen, "The Dread of Woman," *Feminine Psychology* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1967)
- Jameson, Frederic, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983)
- Jameson, Fredric, "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July-August 1984)
- Jerome, Jim, "Screen," *People Weekly* 24.24 (December 9, 1985)
- Kael, Pauline, "The Current Cinema," *New Yorker* 62 (August 11, 1986)
- Kleinhans, Chuck, "Working-Class Film Heroes: Junior Johnson, Evel Knievel and the Film Audience," *JUMP CUT* 2(1974), reprinted in *JUMP CUT: Hollywood, Politics and Counter Cinema*, ed. Peter Steven (Praeger: New York, 1985)
- Kopkind, Andrew, "THE FLY, ALIENS," *The Nation* (September 20, 1986)
- Korpivaara, An, "Roll Over RAMBO," *Ms.* 15.3 (September 1986)
- Knoll, Jack, "Socking It to the Russians," *Newsweek* 106.24 (December 9, 1985)
- Larsen, Earnest, "ALIEN and DAWN OF THE DEAD: High-Tech Horror," *JUMP CUT* 21 (November 1979)
- Marchetti, Gina, "Class, Ideology and Commercial Television: An Analysis of THE A-TEAM," *Journal of Film and Video* 39 (Spring 1987)
- Martin, John W., *The Golden Age of French Cinema* (Boston: Twayne, 1983)
- Modleski, Tania, "The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory," *Studies in Entertainment*
- Modleski, Tania, ed., *Studies in Entertainment* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986)
- Naureckas, Jim, "ALIENS: Mother and the Teeming Hordes," *JUMP CUT* 32 (April 1986)
- O'Brien, John, "Tomfoolery 10, Satire 0," *National Review* 38.5 (March 28, 1986)
- O'Brien, Tom, "Comedy High and Low," *Commonweal* 113.7 (April 11, 1986)
- O'Brien, Tom, Review of ROCKY IV, *Commonweal* 113.1 (January 17, 1986)
- O'Toole, Lawrence, "ALIENS," *Maclean's* 99.30 (July 28, 1986)
- Polan, Dana, "Brief Encounters: Mass Culture and The Evacuation of Sense" in Modleski, ed.
- Saïd, Edward, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979)
- Schickel, Richard, "Help! They're Back!," *Time* 128.4 (July 28, 1986)

Schickel, Richard, "Win the Battle, Use the War," *Time* 126.23 (December 9, 1985)

Sesonske, Alexandre, *Jean Renoir* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980)

Small, Michael, "Sigoumey Weaver Leads an ALIEN Box Office Invasion," *People Weekly* 26.10 (September 8, 1986)

Tarratt, Penelope, "Monsters from the Id," in Grant, ed.

Walker, Janet and McCarroll, Luli, "Renoir on the Bridge: A Reading of BOUDU SAVED FROM DROWNING," *Wide Angle* 4.4 (1981)

Wolfe, Alan, "Society, Liberalism and the Radical Right," *New Left Review* 128 (July-August 1981)

Woods, Robin, "Ideology, Genre, Auteur," in Grant, ed.

[To top](#) [To page 1 of essay](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)

Diary for My Loves. '68 Diaries of politics and love

by Steven Kovács

from *Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, pp. 97-101

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1990, 2006

At noon on October 23, 1989 in front of the Parliament building, the President of Hungary declared his country a democracy. The date auspiciously marked the anniversary of the outbreak of the 1956 Revolution which had abruptly raised hopes of liberation, only to have them crushed in less than two weeks by Soviet tanks. Now after 33 years, that Revolution has triumphed. The 1956 armed uprising not only changed all Hungarians' lives but also signaled the beginning of Soviet Communism's own end. This critical political juncture figures prominently in at least two recent films, Márta Mészáros' *DIARY FOR MY LOVES* and my own film, *'68*.

DIARY FOR MY LOVES is the diary of Márta Mészáros, the second of an intended three-film series which began with her *DIARY FOR MY CHILDREN* in 1982. In *DIARY I*, Mészáros gives a wistful portrait of her own childhood through the character of Juli Kovács as Juli grows up in the late 1930s and then spends the war years in the Soviet Union, where her father, a Communist sculptor, had emigrated in search of the Socialist paradise.

Juli/Mészáros' sweet memories of playing with her mother in fields of flowers become interrupted by the ominous appearance of state security policemen who take the father away. He remains Juli's model for the rest of her life — in political commitment, art, and confrontation with authorities. But his absence has another impact. Juli seeks out men who remind her of him. And she becomes drawn to women in positions of authority with whom she develops problematic relations.

After the war ends and Juli's mother dies, her stepmother Magda brings the teenage girl back to Budapest. The second part of *DIARY I* focuses on Juli's conflict with Magda, a colonel in the AVO, the state security police. Magda tries to dominate her stepdaughter with the militant forcefulness she acquired in the barracks. Through her, Juli also meets one of Magda's comrades, János, who becomes the one man she learns to trust and love in this family and country now so alien to her. Her attachment to János recalls and replaces her idealized relation with her father. The two men look alike and engage her in a similar quiet, understanding way. In this way, the film locates Juli between Magda, the embodiment of Stalinism, and János, whose political commitment stems from a

deep human compassion. At the end of the first film Juli leaves her adolescence behind when she moves out of Magda's house.

DIARY FOR MY LOVES picks up with Juli setting out on her own, first as a textile worker, then a film student and later as a documentary filmmaker. Strangely, Mészáros no longer deals with a highly emotional story of personal growth through conflict with role models. Rather she turns to a more objective narrative.

Why such a shift in tone from Mészáros' first film? The first represented the diary of childhood where emotions override and distort objective reality. But the second deals with a mature, reasoning woman whose goal is to become an observer, a documentarist of life around her. Here external events move into the foreground to which Juli becomes a witness. DIARY FOR MY LOVES seems an ironic title when love relations are almost incidental to the film? Mészáros understands by loves to mean her ideals, mainly her commitment to truth. But she also intends this second part of her diary to chronicle the turbulent era of postwar Hungary which shaped the consciousness of her entire generation.

DIARY II is sprinkled with clips from newsreels, documentaries, and an occasional fiction film — not surprisingly, since these works played an immense role in a future filmmaker's formation, one who started as a documentarist. Those "quoted" segments indicate another way that the movie is intended "for my loves." They represent the reality that Mészáros' generation experienced, one which her Hungarian contemporaries understand. In that respect, the film as a diary functions as a personal reminiscence best understood by those closest to the author. In the film clips lies a drama far greater than any work of fiction could evoke, and that supplies both the challenge and the artistic solution of Mészáros' second diary film.

DIARY II begins at the end of World War II with black-and-white footage of Soviet troops celebrating in the streets of Berlin. This "newsreel" footage turns into fiction film as an actor Stalin alights from a plane to shake hands with victorious soldiers. Such a meshing of reality and fiction keeps recurring in DIARY II. For example, as Juli departs for Moscow, the train station is shown in black-and-white as in all the newsreels. Shots of Imre Nagy, future leader of the 1956 revolution, addressing the government with a program of reforms after Stalin's death, are followed by a shot of Juli herself filming the speech.

With this apparent mixing of styles, Mészáros' aesthetic derives from neither movie magic exhibitionism nor a postmodernist inquiry into the nature of the medium. Rather, Mészáros' DIARY II accurately reflects an era and the life of an individual for whom traditional boundaries of fiction and non-fiction did not cohere. In Stalinist Hungary reality and the perception of reality were both shaped from above. No "objective" reality existed, only that interpreted by the Party. Nor did innocent fiction exist, especially in the sphere of narrative filmmaking. Even fictional film had to reflect supposedly material conditions.

Film's power to interpret and shape material reality had been recognized by Lenin, and his famous words — "Of all the arts the most important for us is film" — stare at Juli from behind the admissions board to film school. This is why Juli chooses to become a documentarist — she wants to take part in creating the new society. That is also why her professors find her first documentary unacceptable — her objective

reporting does not fit Party guidelines. It threatens the program dictated from above. When asked by the admissions board why she wanted to make movies, Juli answered, "They are dreams as well as reality." For Mészáros as a filmmaker her craft blends reality and art, documentary and fiction. She herself started as a documentarist and developed into a fiction film director. Her most powerful fiction films have a strong sense of individual truth and contemporary social reality. They are the logical next step from her documentary work because they aim to show through stories what she has observed in life. She remains a Marxist filmmaker working to express society's general condition through the nuances of individuals' lives.

DIARY II is a carefully constructed work. It treats an entire epoch of Hungarian history — from the height of Stalinism after World War II to its violent rejection in 1956. Stalin embodies the Soviet victory over Nazism, as we see in the opening shots. Juli's story picks up immediately after that when we see her working in a textile mill. There, she is called to a factory meeting to hear the party secretary denounce Tito's maverick Communism. An overly zealous colleague echoes the fanaticism of that day by insisting that they all sing a Communist song in order to fuel the comrades' dedication to labor and fighting the enemy. People are taken away, including János, Juli's one true friend. Juli herself gets fired when the management finds out who her father was. She is living in a bizarre world of mirrors, attending a play in which Communist comrades bravely speak out against their Nazi captors at a German prison, while at that moment thousands of falsely accused people are being tortured in the prisons of the Hungarian People's Republic.

Juli seeks to fulfill her own ambitions by applying to film school. Although she is rejected by the Hungarians, she perseveres until she is accepted in Moscow. Here she forms a strong bond with the famous actress Anna Pavlovna, who comes to her rescue when a disciplinary board of her peers accuse Juli of leading a too independent lifestyle. Once the actress has saved Juli's skin, Pavlovna bawls her out, accusing Juli accurately of her one great fault, naiveté.

"What are you? Russian or Hungarian? Don't you understand that they are afraid of you too? If you want to become a filmmaker, you have to stop thinking of yourself only. You must think of others!"

But political events overwhelm Juli's personal struggles. We see the intensification of Stalinism in the unveiling of his monstrous statue near Heroes' Square in front of party leaders and a crowd of hundreds of thousands — the very same statue which workers from Csepel will topple in October 1956. We see the growing despotism of the Hungarian Communist Party chief Mátyás Rákosi (an Adolph Zukor look-alike) who assumes the paramount post of President as he imitates the Soviet model.

Then it is March 2, 1953. In the somber tones of a radio announcer, we hear the news that Stalin has suffered a fatal stroke. In a washroom Juli's fellow students stand together in shock as they dutifully remember him with reverence and speak of his role in leading Russia to victory in the war. Juli has more personal recollections — her father's arrest, then a limbless soldier brought home from the front begging to be killed. Once again newsreels appear, depicting thousands of people in the streets of Budapest "mourning" the dictator's death. Mészáros

intercuts shots of Magda and Juli with the newsreel footage. Magda is crying. Juli cannot take it any more and fights to get out of the oppressive crowd. The cold Russian winter begins to thaw. Imre Nagy proposes new reforms. János is released from prison. Newsreels show Bulgarin signing a pact with Tito, marking a new age of Soviet-Yugoslav friendship, followed by the honorary reburial of the remains of Lászo Rajk, the most prominent Hungarian victim of the previous anti-Tito purges. People begin to dare to speak out: a woman interrupts a stage rehearsal to accuse an actor of having reported her husband. Back in Moscow Juli is called in finally to be told about her father's fate. He has been "rehabilitated."

"Where is he then? "

"He died a few years ago."

"Where is his grave?"

"We don't know."

One night Juli learns about disturbances in Budapest. She rushes to the Hungarian embassy, asking permission to go home. The embassy official speaks to her across the iron gate: "There are comrades in Budapest who would be glad to be here." The film ends on a close-up of Juli's face as we hear the iron gate clang to shut her out.

It may appear strange that in this Hungarian film built on documentary footage, the political climax of a generation's history, the 1956 Revolution, is never shown. But for Márta Mészáros and her loves, those events remain deeply engraved in memory. The journey from May 1945 to October 1956 is her subject.

DIARY II recalls another important film about a woman's experiences in post-war Europe. The country is West Germany, the director Fassbinder, the movie THE MARRIAGE OF MARIA BRAUN. That film, too, begins in WWII's final days and spans a period of nine years until the summer of 1954. This was the date of the famed world cup soccer match in which West Germany upset Hungary's "Golden Team," 3-2. The broadcast of that match plays loudly over MARIA BRAUN's final explosive scene. In this film, Fassbinder presents Germany's bitter years of defeat and painful reconstruction through the character of a freewheeling amoral seductress, a female picaro, who survives by her wits and charms in that destroyed nation. The film makes no explicit reference to specific events from those years, except for its opening and closing, which stand like bookends to define the period. Rather, the film makes postwar Germany's story poignant simply by evoking it, telling it through the life of a hardened operator/enchantress.

Compared to Fassbinder's film, Márta Mészáros' DIARY FOR MY LOVES appears colder, more detached, more like a documentary. It's heroine is not sexy. She is a serious film student. Mészáros' film does not involve the audience as emotionally as does Fassbinder's. The reasons for the differences are not merely differences in their authors' temperament. Rather, their styles derive from the experiences of two different nations: one in the West where the individual is emphasized, independent of the social and political forces of her society; the other in the East where political dynamics affected every individual's consciousness. For Márta Mészáros and her loves, the newsreel clips evoke the sharpest emotional and intellectual reactions.

Like every diary, DIARY FOR MY LOVES is an intensely personal statement, best appreciated by her colleagues and countrymen. I was one such viewer because I grew up in Hungary during those ten years after the war. My contemporary Eva Hoffman in her recently published memoir *Lost in Translation* has named the chapter on her years in Poland after the war, "Paradise," because

"the country of my childhood lives within me with a primacy that is a form of love ...It has fed me language, perceptions, sounds, the human kind. It has given me the colors and the furrows of reality, my first loves."

This is how I, too, recall the Hungary of my childhood. The idealism of the Communist regime after the brutalities of World War II only heightened my sense of living in an enchanted world. According to my child's version of history, I had been born at the best of all possible junctures, the birth of the Golden Age, when capitalism had finally given way to the final stage of evolution, Communism. I was in a privileged position — my father was a Party member, the general manager of a major state enterprise, and my mother's father had been a leading Social Democrat before the war.

My parents had no doubts that this was the correct way. They had not only experienced the injustice and oppression of a nearly feudal society before the war, but as Jews they had lived through the horrors of the war. I grew up on propaganda — revolutionary songs, Soviet films, huge parades. Stalin was the savior of my family, Jews, leftists, and the working class. I went to the Gorky school, attended only by the sons and daughters of the elite, where we learned Russian from the first grade. We had our ten o'clock snack in a library whose walls were inscribed with the words of Sándor Petöfi, the nationalist revolutionary, who exhorted his colleagues in "Poets of the 19th Century,"

"When from the basket of wealth everyone can take equally,
When before the bench of law everyone can be judged impartially,
When the sunlight of the spirit shall shine into the house of every man
and woman:
Then we can say our work is done. We have arrived in the land of
Canaan."

Our family left Hungary after the 1956 Revolution because my parents were more dissatisfied with the regime than I had thought. Although they had acutely understood pre-war Hungary's class injustices and anti-Semitism, as white collar workers they had also experienced then a limited form of democracy and a limited form of economic opportunity. They were more comfortable with a free marketplace and preferred a free exchange of ideas and political views.

Our reception and perceptions of the United States do not fall into easily definable categories. Despite the fact that we landed in "the great melting pot," we had as tough a time as any other immigrant group in terms of fitting into the rituals of an alien society. Despite the fact that we had come to the "land of the free and home of the brave," the U.S. government sought to deport my courageous, freedom-loving father for having been a member of the Communist Party. Despite the fact that we were finally in "the land of opportunity," my parents started working at the minimum wage of \$1 an hour. While we were better off in absolute terms, we lived

at the bottom of the ladder.

The ignorance of most North Americans about the world at large and the provincialism of life in the Midwest were a shock to us who had lived in a European capital city and had experienced international politics on our skins. Cold War sloganeering tasted just as unpalatable on this side of the Iron Curtain as on the other. Maybe I was more aware of it here because I was older.

Having come from such a different place, I had a reaction very close to that of U.S. kids as this country emerged from that 50s Cold War mentality into the 60s with its political and cultural turmoil. All of us felt a breath of fresh air after the stagnation which had characterized domestic and international life. And this phenomenon was not limited to us. As the decade progressed, we saw our generation challenging the old order throughout the world — in France, Czechoslovakia, Vietnam, and Mexico, to name only the most obvious.

In the United States, the promise at the start of the decade was made by the youngest man ever elected President. Kennedy offered an alternative to the old cold warriors. He promised imagination, enthusiasm, an open-mindedness which we embraced with the idealism of our teenage years. I believe that much of the radicalism of the late 60s in the United States resulted from the frustration baby boomers experienced when that promise was shattered by assassins' bullets. 60s euphoria stamped our generation. Whether in political choices, music, drugs, or alternative life styles, we were moved and mobilized to action by following the paths opened by our imagination. The reaction of the 70s and 80s became all the more intolerable to us because we had grown up breathing the sweet air of possibilities.

To recapture that lost period and apparently lost ideals, I decided to make a film about the year that saw these powerful liberating forces culminate both here and abroad. I needed to make this film at once personal and general. In '68 I chose to depict a Hungarian family adapting to the "American way of life." In superficial detail the family resembled my own — '56 immigrants living in San Francisco, one brother gay, the other "political."

But I made the characters' situation more typical. I chose to show the emergence of political consciousness in the son of an autocratic, conservative paterfamilias, Zoltan Szabó, who sacrifices his humanity for the U.S. dream of running his own business. As did so many members of my generation, son Peter gains political awareness through the rough-and-tumble of everyday life in a politically charged year. A junior in college with vague ideas about his future and even fuzzier notions about freedom and democracy, Peter drifts from the classroom to journalism to motorcycles to rock music to grass to hero worship of Robert Kennedy.

In the film, political choices are ultimately personal. Peter's curiosity leads him to stay informed about the year's cataclysmic events, but his political awakening comes through personal realization. His involvement with a Chinese radical makes him more sensitive to the political issues and also brings out his father's racism. He breaks with his father at the end because Zoltán refuses to accept younger brother Sandy for being a homosexual. Peter takes a radical stand because of love.

'68 dovetails with Mészáros' DIARY FOR MY LOVES perfectly, but not because I

planned it that way. Rather, the two films share our common formation. My film begins exactly where DIARY II leaves off, with newsreel footage of the 1956 Revolution. While Hungarians find that footage as familiar as the Zapruder footage is to North Americans, I had to include more highlights of that most memorable Cold War conflict for a U.S. audience.

But why start a film '68 with footage of 1956? The *Hollywood Reporter* quipped, "Oops, someone in the editing room must have sipped the electric Kool-Aid." However, electricity was in the events, not in the refreshments. 1956 informed and forecast 1968. The Czechs prepared their spring of reform with great caution because they wanted to avoid brutal suppression by Soviet tanks. Not that it did them much good. Similarly in the United States in 1968, there was a brief outburst of hope that would soon die out. McCarthy's "Children's Crusade" led to Lyndon Johnson's announcement he would not seek reelection, then came the heady campaign of Robert Kennedy, followed by his assassination, police brutality at the Chicago Democratic Convention, and the subsequent election of Richard Nixon.

I also chose to open with Hungary's 1956 Revolution footage because newsreels were to function as a significant narrative device in my film, just as they did in DIARY II. I felt what Mészáros must also have thought. Political events of that period played such a significant role in the characters' lives as well as in the lives of many in the audience, that I could best chart the characters' evolution in terms of the events which unfolded at various points in their lives.

The Tet Offensive and the Chicago demonstrations are designations as clear as their calendar dates. However, profuse reliance on documentary material creates an aesthetic problem. One of my models for '68 was Gustave Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, in which he wrote about his own growing to manhood during the 1848 Revolution. In that work he set out to "write the moral history, or rather the sentimental history, of the men of my generation." He recognized one of his greatest problems:

"I am afraid that my background will eat up my foreground: that is the trouble with the historical novel. Historical figures are more interesting than fictional characters, above all when the latter have moderate passions: the reader finds Frederic less interesting than Lamartine."

Similarly, in the case of '68 Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. threaten to overshadow the two sons' concerns.

'68 opens with footage of demonstrations leading to the 1956 Revolution and it ends with Peter joining a demonstration against the Vietnam War twelve years later. The two actions of resistance against an oppressive regime are ironically aimed at the two rival great powers. That same apparent contradiction also characterized Hungary's 1956 Revolution itself. The teenage heroes of that conflict learned to make Molotov cocktails from Soviet films about the Great October Revolution. I also have vivid memories of watching a truck carrying armed civilians chanting "Russki go home" a couple of days after shooting began at the central radio station. They too became actors in history. They had had ample time to learn the lessons of revolution during ten years of Russian domination.

1917, 1956, and 1968 still have relevance for the 1990s. Clearly a system which

cannot provide ample food, shelter, and basic consumer goods for its citizens after 70 years stands as a failure. Economic failure created the dissatisfaction leading to political reform which has recently swept the Soviet Union, Poland, and Hungary. All of Eastern Europe is now witnessing the most profound and exciting political changes since they were created as Socialist entities. They face the process of democratizing their political institutions. They are also experimenting with loosening economic controls in order to bolster their productivity and material wellbeing.

Yet to swing to the other extreme, of foreign-owned companies competing in unchecked trade, would also lead to impoverishment. Unbridled free trade has produced great class inequities in the United States as well as in the Third World. Eastern Europe faces the challenge of instituting greater democracy and creating a healthy economy without betraying the ideals of Socialism. Neither can we be content with the United States today. The conservative reaction to the 60s still dominates government policy, as we can see in the Bush Administration's commitment to an excessive military budget, favoring tax cuts to the rich, weakening the social security system, and pursuing a foreign policy bent on destroying progressive foreign governments.

Writers, artists, and filmmakers have the role of fighting against the injustices they see in their own society. That holds true on whichever side of the rusting Iron Curtain they find themselves. The only answer is to question, criticize and resist.

[To top](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)

The Marriage of Maria Braun. Veronika Voss. Lola Fassbinder's use of Brechtian aesthetics

by H-B. Moeller

from *Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, pp. 102-107

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1990, 2006

Brechtianism has for many years played a major role in New German Cinema. This filmmaking has emphasized history, values and culture, employing Brechtian aesthetics to critique German society.

On the level of Brechtian politics, the individual postBrechtian filmmaker may either approach Brecht, as with Alexander Kluge, or keep at a distance from him, as with Hans-Jürgen Syberberg. In his trilogy about Germany, the late Rainer Werner Fassbinder remained close to the Brechtian model. However, critical reviews have largely tended to ignore the trilogy's literary and Brechtian aspects; AngloAmerican critics in particular saw Andy Warhol and Douglas Sirk in Fassbinder. However, the literary and Brechtian aspects indicate the New German Cinema's origins as well as its technological or "mediological," i.e. media-theoretical, directions. In particular, Fassbinder's trilogy invites a reexamination so as to illuminate the Brechtian attack which Fassbinder waged against the West German success story.

THE MARRIAGE OF MARIA BRAUN (1978), LOLA (1981), and VERONICA VOSS (1982) comprise Fassbinder's trilogy. As a group, these films show nothing of Warhol's aestheticism and little of Sirk's melodrama. At best the melodramatic formula serves as a cited genre convention that is, at the same time, distanced, undermined, and subverted by economic and feminist reasoning to lay bare its bourgeois ideology. Fassbinder concentrates on West German history and on characters who represent the "strangely black and debris-covered fifties" (Günter Grass).

In THE MARRIAGE OF MARIA BRAUN Maria refused to abandon her love for her MIA German husband, Hermann, in the post-WWII years, although a close friend personally confirms his death. War-bride Maria ekes out a living for herself and her mother, accepting a job as a "hostess" at a GI nightclub. The MIA does eventually return — at a most inappropriate time when Maria and Bill, her black GI lover, are about to make love. Maria wants to end the two rivals' duel in the bedroom and accidentally kills the U.S. soldier. Her husband assumes blame for the murder and goes to prison.

Again waiting for her absent Hermann, Maria rides the crest of the West German economic miracle into the roles of homeowner and textile executive. Upon

Hermann's release from prison in the early fifties, he disappears, only to resurface after the death of Maria's boss and lover, the industrialist Oswald. Hermann and Maria now offer each other their fortunes, his being half of the textile industrialist's estate (Oswald had willed it to Hermann on condition he would go abroad after prison.) Maria and Hermann both perish suddenly in an accident with their gas stove.

The politics of personal relations as they are shown during the resurgence of postwar German capitalism is the theme of *VERONIKA VOSS*, the centerpiece of Fassbinder's German trilogy. The "medical-municipal complex" frustrates the investigations of reporter Robert Krohn, who strives to expose a Dr. Katz's illegal dealings in narcotics in order to save the life of actress Veronika Voss, whom he loves. This heroine, a former German film industry star, has become dependent on her physician's drug supply. Katz's clinic is a front for a crime operation; in return for drugs, Dr. Katz blackmails her patients, forcing them to will their assets to her. The city narcotics official, Dr. Edel, working closely with the corrupt physician, derails the reporter's investigation. Krohn fails to prove Katz's guilt in the death of Krohn's girlfriend/assistant, Henriette, and of Veronika Voss. Fassbinder again symbolically analyzes exploitation and corruption in Western society in general and in West Germany in particular.

LOLA is the final critical cinematic commentary on West German life and its social and economic organization. The capitalist restoration of 1957 affects Lola, the chief attraction in a provincial "night club." Her married friend, developer Schuckert, profiteers from the economic miracle which allows him to be with Lola. However, building commissioner von Bohm not only wants to stop local graft, he also wants Lola, falling in love with her before comprehending her role in the "Villa Fink" establishment. Von Bohm's love corrupts him. He gets Lola; she gets a privileged position in society as well as Schuckert's night club/brothel as a wedding present; and the developer continues to extract an advantage from the municipal building boom.

Structurally, *MARIA BRAUN*, *VERONIKA VOSS*, and *LOLA* form "frame films," i.e. parables of historical German society in which the director sets the story of individual characters. The films exemplify the later Fassbinder's penchant for narrating German history through the lives of women such as Maria, Veronika, and Lola. Stills of German Chancellors form frames around both *LOLA* and *THE MARRIAGE OF MARIA BRAUN*. Maria pursues her life and career under real political leaders from Hitler to Schmidt; Lola pursues hers under Adenauer.

In *MARIA BRAUN* and *VERONIKA VOSS*, the story of an individual woman melds, with her death, into the history of contemporary 1950s German society. In both films, soccer, the Central European popular sport and a significant Fassbinder metaphor that I will explore shortly, marks the points of transition. In the Brauns' gas-shattered home, a live broadcast of the 1954 world soccer championship blares forth. Turning away from the medical practice where Veronika Voss dies from drug abuse, journalist Robert Krohn, her would-be protector, goes to attend a football game.

Like *MARIA BRAUN*, *VERONIKA VOSS* begins indirectly during the Third Reich as the film actress looks at herself in an UFA motion picture she made at the time of her affair with Goebbels, the German film studio's Nazi head. In that film-

within-a-film, she met her death in a manner foreshadowing her end at the conclusion of the Fassbinder trilogy. The wheel or frame structure comes full circle. In all three films the sound track, often in the form of a radio broadcast, serves as a negative commentary on the West German Government.

All three films draw upon the interpenetration of history, cinema, and literature. Each seizes on the concrete historical reality of the Adenauer period. All "quote" from contemporary motion pictures.^[1][\[open notes in new window\]](#) They relate to printed text, however varied the "adaptation." LOLA is freely modeled on Heinrich Mann's Professor Unrat, the literary model for Stenberg's THE BLUE ANGEL. Likewise, VERONIKA VOSS follows the biography of the German actress Sybille Schmitz. My detailed discussion of the literary connections to MARIA BRAUN will follow.

Through reference to texts and contexts outside the trilogy's films, Fassbinder promotes our constant awareness of artifice, and thus his films approach Brechtian aesthetics. Demonstrative, distancing, and non-illusionist presentational style stamps the entire trilogy, and that style alternates with and manipulates a Sirk-style melodramatic structure.

Brechtian "separation of elements," for instance, clearly shapes the static deployment of the Chancellors' still photos. In both MARIA BRAUN and LOLA, such distancing visuals become further isolated by the absence of accompanying sound. Beyond that one finds the "exhibitionism" of the Brechtian performance which draws attention to itself as performance. In the opening shot of MARIA BRAUN the spectator witnesses the wedding ceremony; as on a movie set, the wall toward the viewer is conspicuously missing.

To force attention to his technique, Fassbinder appears in cameo. In MARIA BRAUN he surfaces as the black marketeer who sells the title figure a dress. In VERONIKA VOSS, the heroine initially reviews her screen role as the drug victim of an exploitative woman physician (the Brechtian-style "preview," in a sense). While the camera retreats, Fassbinder appears seated directly behind, viewing Veronika as she views herself on screen.

Not only has the filmmaker asserted himself, he also has used one of Brecht's presentation techniques which induces the viewers to see themselves as part of the larger process of cinematic production and consumption. In the trilogy, then, Fassbinder alludes to history and to existing works and conventions to depict the Adenauer Era. Money conquers morals and business prevails over love. While this is not an uncommon theme in German literature, cabaret, and cinema, Fassbinder presents it in Brechtian terms.

To examine the Brechtian aesthetics in detail, I shall turn to an exemplary analysis of THE MARRIAGE OF MARIA BRAUN. Despite the difference between print media and cinema, this film, by using leitmotifs and multiple interpretations, closely resembles a book. It is also a literary film. In spite of Sirk-style melodramatic plot and modest bow to Hollywood's entertainment aesthetics, Fassbinder's MARIA BRAUN owes its debt to Brecht's demonstrative presentation mode.

The film resembles literary works in ambitiously sketching a "reading model" of

post-war culture in the Federal Republic. Maria Braun's feelings and marriage perish in the German economic miracle; her experience thus becomes a parable of West Germany. Finally, Gerhard Zwerenz wrote the "after-the-film-story" of THE MARRIAGE OF MARIA BRAUN during the film's production.[2] This simultaneous novelization demonstrates the new interaction between literature and film. Because the film's cultural and commercial status, Brechtian perceptual structures, and hybrid relation between cinema and literature, Fassbinder's film deserves an in-depth study.

The Brauns' marriage is split by time and space. This allows the director to make a cultural, historic, socioeconomic and quasi-feminist criticism that resembles Brecht's motifs and fundamental stance:

1. Bourgeois morals and ideals are subjected to criticism.
2. The female lead appears as a strong, dominant character.
3. Maria Braun, like Brecht's Mother Courage, attempts to survive purely as an individual, without recourse to collective or social change.
4. Maria Braun, again like Brecht's Mother Courage, learns little so that the viewer might learn much.
5. As with Brecht, the main figures suggest that it is difficult to be good in the capitalist world.
6. The film's social critique is based on an economic rationale.
7. Characters and events in the film give the impression of being historic and representative.
8. The worldview of this genre avoids tragedy and creates a stance toward the action with comic overtones and distance. In short, for all the emotions and entertainment value, the work is basically didactic.

Clearly, Fassbinder — like Brecht — critically examines the middle-class ideal of marriage. Looking at the title, we see that the Brauns' marriage is not a union of two people often together; according to Maria it lasts half a day and an entire night. However, to say that the marriage was unimportant would be wrong. Because of her marriage, Maria wasted years during and after the war; and out of conjugal loyalty, Hermann Braun assumed responsibility for a murder committed by Maria and served her prison term. In addition, while Maria waits for Hermann's release she works her way up to a managerial position. Then she waits a few more years while Hermann is overseas. The ideal rather than the reality of a middle-class marriage keeps them together. Both partners retain their ideals until material desires emerge, and both secure half of the textile industrialist's will.

As in many of Brecht's works, the main emphasis in Fassbinder's film lies — witness the title THE MARRIAGE OF MARIA BRAUN — with the strong heroine. Actually Hermann Braun, as absent soldier, prisoner, and emigrant, exists for us only vicariously through Maria. Maria Braun programs herself into an emancipated, successful woman.

Can this motion picture, beyond the Brechtian purview, be considered in line with contemporary critical women's film — even forgetting for the moment the past feminist contention that Fassbinder as a male was unable to create feminist cinema? The woman protagonists of the West German feminist film from Helke Sander's photographer Edda of REDUPERS (1977), via Margarethe von Trotta's title figure of THE SECOND AWAKENING OF CHRISTA KLAGES (1977) to Ulrike

Ottinger's *MADAME X* (1977) tend to set models of emancipated, activist, and prevailing women.

By the end of the film, is Maria, who no doubt is viewed as a contemporary figure, an independent heroine or a victim? She succumbs to strategies of male suppression, failing in a masculine world where she is: (1) persuaded to embrace society's male values in order to rise in the patriarchal hierarchy, (2) manipulated by Oswald and Braun, who reached a financial agreement behind her back keeping Hermann Braun overseas during Oswald's short lease on life, (3) noisily surrounded by the raging German victory celebration at the Bern world soccer championship, the European male sport, (4) under the patriarchal eyes of statesmen Adenauer, Erhard, Kiesinger and Schmidt, whose portraits close the film. Thus, the post-war ascent Maria Braun shares with Germany encroaches upon feminist components. Although one cannot see this really as a feminist film, its larger socio-cultural context includes critical women's views. Maria Braun the social climber is also a victim of economic advancement.

Fassbinder raises a Brechtian-style question of how a person can maintain human dignity and ethics under capitalism. The film reminds viewers that German society remains indebted to women who were productive during the early post-war period and later shoved into the background. The film also suggests that women, because of their bourgeois value system, have traditionally acted in pursuit of private happiness, instead of serving public consciousness and socio-political reforms. The film also takes up as a major theme, patterns of dominance or power conflicts between partners in a relationship.

Well before *MARIA BRAUN*, the filmmaker criticized bourgeois sexual morals in *THE BITTER TEARS OF PETRA KANT* and *FOX AND HIS FRIENDS*. To be sure, the power struggle in *THE MARRIAGE OF MARIA BRAUN* preoccupies mainly the chief characters; it scarcely matters in other sexual references and partner relations. Rather, the latter serve Fassbinder to sketch several variations of adult relationships. The couples Betti and Willi, Maria's mother and Hans Wetzl, and barmaids with U.S. soldiers offer alternatives to the relation between Maria and Hermann Braun.

Various concepts of love become formulated in the dialogue. Maria Braun early intones the romantic song of love. The disillusioned barmaid considers her partner merely a bodily presence; for her, feelings are simple outward manifestations of libido. Maria's practical mother asks why in wartimes she satisfies herself with substitute foods but does not allow more than one partner in matters of love. In contrast, Betti and Maria divert themselves from longing with the hit song, "Nur nicht aus Liebe weinen, es gibt auf Erden nicht nur den einen," or "Don't Cry for Love. There is More than One Man on Earth." Initially grieving over their husbands held prisoner of war in the postwar period, they later mourn Betti's alienation from Willi and Hermann's imprisonment. Individualistic stances of bourgeois morality are opposed by contrary impulses and models.

The difficulties of Maria Braun's love and marriage are implied in these epic-theater demonstrative portraits of varieties of romantic and partner relations. Seeing Betti and Willi's failing marriage, Maria and Willi discuss the tensions which the new climate of the German economic miracle has brought. What will become of a marriage when one partner remains behind and the other, full of

initiative, advances?

Maria's defeat in marriage does not solely result from dividing her love for Hermann and her sexual activity with Oswald into separate personality functions. She, unlike Willi, never clarifies for herself the consequences of business advancement. At most, she talks fleetingly with Hermann about the relation in which the woman works for the man (Männergefüß). She fails to consider socio-psychological consequences. Has she considered whether her aggressive business personality is still compatible with the unassuming Hermann Braun? She merely rises.

Through recurring and mirroring figures that vary and fuse relations, Fassbinder produces ambiguous dialectical statements of literary or Brechtian quality. Thematic, visual and audio leitmotifs help sketch a subliminal, dangerous curve opposing Maria's professional success and foreshadowing a catastrophic ending. Like cigarettes and the shadow pattern of bars, detonations figure as prominent leitmotifs, indicating that a threat progressively comes closer to Maria.

An example of this are the detonations we hear immediately after the war. Maria and Betti, still adorned with sandwich-board signs, hear them while passing a bombed-out building. In the last quarter of the film, the detonations again resound as Maria and Betti clamber through the ruins; the association is also visually reinforced. Reconstruction and the economic progress of the fifties are linked to Maria, the typical figure. This main leitmotif also sounds at Maria's workplace during the textile industry boom. It also rings out as attorney Dr. Klaus announces Hermann Braun's release in a week. It begins again as accountant Senkenberg and secretary Ehmke mourn the industrialist Oswald's death in the presence of Maria. Maria's public sphere and private menace are literally synchronized.

Fassbinder, like Brecht, makes the heroine into a type. Maria's personal fate is clearly linked by this audio leitmotif of detonations to the historical situation of West German society when one realizes that the series of sounds increasingly corresponds to the bombing raid at the beginning of the film. Fassbinder reinforces the symbolic congruence of the sounds by augmenting the jack-hammer noises of the first reconstruction scene with the sounds of explosions. As a truck approaches the wooden fence, its motor backfires. Two boys set off virtual explosions by setting off hard grenade fuses in a bomb crater. At the end when Maria is killed in a gas explosion, her private menace, society's reconstruction, and socio-industrial advance, including Maria's career, become entangled.

Fassbinder employs war sounds of the Third Reich as an acoustic backdrop to postwar reconstruction in the Federal Republic of Germany. On this poetic level of information, Fassbinder's linking of leitmotifs raises Maria into a type — she is no longer merely an individual in German wartime and postwar period. Just as Maria's advance includes her fall, in a deeper sense West German reconstruction is seen to be entwined with failure. There is a tension between what is said on the sound track and what is perceived through the visuals. In this sense, visual and especially acoustic leitmotifs are offered to the viewer not only for entertainment, but as part of the epic theater-demonstrative didacticism of the film.

One question has occupied critics everywhere: Did Maria intentionally cause the gas to explode or not?[3] Peter Märthesheimer, of the *Westdeutscher Rundfunk*,

and outstanding co-producer of New Wave German films, contributed to the screenplay of MARIA BRAUN. He created a version of Maria, who, upon learning of the secret agreement between Hermann Braun and Oswald tells herself: "I'm going end it all..."[4] According to Marthesheimer's version of the screenplay, Maria decides to die and "causes a realistic car accident" (9).

The filmmaker, on the contrary, fashions an ending more open, public, and ambiguous. The director allows the viewer room to question whether Maria Braun aborted her child from Bill or lost it through miscarriage.[5] One can say, however, that the filmmaker rejects a notion of a private, purely personal decision to die as the basic explanation for the ending. Maria should be read as an historical figure with Germany as background. This is confirmed by an observation Fassbinder made in an interview in 1980. Asked about the connection between the feminine figures in his films and history, the director maintained,

"It works better, when relating something about history, to use women. Men have..a prescribed role in the writing of history ...that is why I don't find men so interesting as figures..; while women..taken singularly are often capable..of doing things one would not have considered possible" (Limmer, p. 82).

Because of the film's open Brechtian structures, one cannot explain the ending by personalizing it in terms of Maria Braun's possible suicide. These open structures must be examined more closely. The aesthetics, epic portrayal, and dialectic method of perception of the later Brecht make types out of real historical figures in order to derive more meaning from their actions than from their character. In their fascination with Fassbinder's reverence for exiled director Douglas Sirk and his Hollywood work, film scholars tend to overlook or underestimate the Brechtian elements in Fassbinder's work, regardless of whether these elements originate from Brecht or from cinematic borrowers Jean-Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet or Jean-Luc Godard.

Indeed, Brechtian forms and distancing effects can be found in many individual scenes in the film. These often contribute to certain passages' multi-interpretability, where economic and metaphysical "reading models" coexist. For example, in the first quarter of the film, Maria meets a black-marketeer, from whom she purchases clothes and schnaps. As the camera swings from Maria's head to her hand, in which she holds her jewels, Maria explains why she needs the schnaps.

"Schnaps? For my mother. That's how she stands her troubles with her daughter. And numbs the grief of her soul."

One recognizes the stylized business transaction, racketeering, depicted in the style of elevated drama with quasi-metric speech. The camera doesn't just uncover what is truly important, the jewels, but it destroys the theatrical illusion for those familiar with contemporary cultural life in West Germany. For the actor playing the black marketeer role is Fassbinder, the filmmaker himself.

In addition, nearly interrupting the flow of action at the end of the film, Maria haltingly considers whether she should light the cigarette — yet this is what the catastrophe depends on. Actress Hanna Schygulla uses Brechtian aesthetics and

the epic acting style, which is a nonpsychological presentation.

Fassbinder uses Chancellors' portraits, which contribute to a non-psychological analysis. The historic documents function as mute commentary. On the one hand, they lift the individual case into historic moment, i.e., Maria Braun's destruction during the rise of West Germany. On the other hand, the genre changes from fiction and a film about an individual to de facto public statement. With this historical imagery, the filmmaker creates an additional level of reality, which differs from the established, natural reality. The Chancellors' portraits, displayed as black and white negatives, are harsher than the portraits presented in color. The advantage of this device is clear. When the viewer of the film leaves the cinema, s/he thinks not only of Maria Braun and her melodramatic accident but questions the country and those who rule it.

Brechtian alienation devices and associations through leitmotifs lead the viewer to the epic-demonstrative superstructure of the parable. *THE MARRIAGE OF MARIA BRAUN* is identified as an historical parable, through its historical framework, i.e., the chancellors' portraits at the end and Hitler's portrait at the beginning. The spirited failure of Germany's ascent, elements continuing from predemocratic Germany, and political restoration are all illustrated by Fassbinder through Maria Braun. Her exemplary aspect can be seen whenever she applies her feelings; it is almost as though they were split from her professional intellect. According to the law of the parable, the same split applies to the Federal Republic of Germany and its reconstruction.

Why, during the reunion of Maria and Hermann Braun, is the soccer game broadcast at such a high volume, so that one follows the characters' dialogue only with great difficulty? Why does the sportscast blare as Oswald's will is made public? We need to keep in mind here that this is not just any sports broadcast, but the last round of the World Soccer Cup played by the Federal Republic of Germany and Hungary on July 4th, 1954. Sociologist Hans-Joachim Winkler, in his 1972 *Sport und politische Bildung*, or "Sports and Political Education," states,

"Via the victory in the soccer World Championship of 1954, spectator sports...did more for the development of an FRG national sentiment than the economic miracle" (103).

Using the World Cup report to achieve a distancing effect, Fassbinder closely approaches Brechtian aesthetics and Brechtian politics as well. We have to remember here that German sports, politicized by the Nazis, was boycotted internationally after the surrender of 1945. Not until 1950 could the Federal Republic of Germany send its soccer team to an international meet. And no German had been able to win a medal there. The 1952 Olympic games in Helsinki were the first major sports event to which the German team was admitted after World War II. The Germans, not accustomed to participating in, much less to winning, prominent sports events, celebrated the World Cup victory in 1954 with nationalistic demonstrations.

In fact the German magazine, *Der Spiegel*, reported that in the stadium of Bern, Switzerland "thousands of German fans began to sing the 'Deutschlandlied,' the German national hymn, after the final whistle—the first stanza: Deutschland, Deutschland über alles...von der Maas bis an die Memel, von der Etsch bis an den

Belt" (21/1974, p. 113) — the very stanza forbidden by the allies as a testimony of German imperialism. The news magazine further reported,

"During the victory party with the championship team Dr. Peco Bauwens, president of the DFB-German Soccer Association, conjured the old Germanic god of thunder, with a 'wild swell of Teutonic phrases.' He also condemned the envy of the romance (welsch) peoples and confirmed to the players that they had carried 'the flag in their hearts'" (113).

Likewise, according to *Der Spiegel*, the upper echelon of the Bonn government and political parties went all the way to Berlin to a reception for the German championship team in the overflowing Olympic Stadium. In other words, Fassbinder has here identified and cinematically exploited a powerful movement both in the history of German sports and political restoration.

Clearly, Fassbinder here employs Brechtian aesthetics and operates on the level of Brechtian politics. The emotional recording of the German World Cup victory, the birth of West German identity, drowns out the story of the individual, Maria Braun. With the championship, suddenly uniting all citizens of the Federal Republic, her on-air listing of the missing-in-action ends. Replacing personal enquiries on the Braun family radio, this sport event which raised national consciousness is broadcast. Moreover, this emotional report contributes dramatically to raising the character Maria Braun into a larger national figure. This is achieved by distancing.

Cinema lends itself well to the Brechtian objective of an open text. As Fassbinder demonstrates film's Brechtian Possibilities in *THE MARRIAGE OF MARIA BRAUN*, cinema can invite a contrapuntal organization of modes of thought and presentation by its sheer availability of several channels of information, by the *Gesamtkunstwerk* available to film's light, visuals, music as well as on-and-off sound. In this trilogy about West Germany, especially his masterful *THE MARRIAGE OF MARIA BRAUN*, Fassbinder has made ample use of film's dialectical potential.

SOME TERMS OF BRECHTIAN FILM AESTHETICS

Like Brecht's theater, Brechtian cinema (called also alternative or counter-cinema) attempts to dispense, at least intermittently, with cinema's aura of the transparently factual and the authentic.

Epic film uses an anti-illusionistic style of presentation. It replaces conventional suspense with a didactic-narrative presentation, the hypnotized spectator with the critical, rational one. The focus shifts from action and outcome to argument and analysis, using devices such as intertitles and commentary.

Distancing or alienation effects counter the viewers' passive, conventional perception of events and social acts. Brecht often opened up the theater space revealing the staging apparatus. Filmmakers often try to find ways to expose the very processes of cinematic signification, including making their own role visible.

Separation of elements: The Brechtian film separates action, sound, music, and the

narrative voice. Rather than "natural" or suited to the occasion and situation, these usually integrated components are contrasted. For example, Alexander Kluge accompanies images of Hitler with the Beatles' "Yesterday" in his sequence of the composite film, DAY OF GERMAN ART.

Social Gest (or Gestus): In Walter Benjamin's words, distancing an action or moment can highlight social relations between things rather than simply presenting them as unquestioned givens. For example, Kluge's YESTERDAY GIRL shows only the back view of the judge's head and frontal views of parts of his face emphasizing glasses and mouth. Here, Brecht and others are often indebted to the silent film.

Open Form: This means a less smooth, perfected and artful literary, theatrical and cinematic form than we conventionally expect. Dialectical, contradictory statements and image-sound relations raise questions the artist leaves unsolved, hoping the spectator will take up these issues.

Note: Mere use of documentary or commentary does not constitute the Brechtian mode. The above devices plus an emphasis on actual history and current events, the use of non-professional actors, rhymes, jump cutting, freeze frames, etc. are used cumulatively and for a clear social-political purpose not just for their own sake.

NOTES

1. MARIA BRAUN, e.g., "re-shoots" the familiar frame of the checkered-pane window from Wolfgang Staudte's DIE MORDER SIND UNTER UNS /THE MURDERERS ARE AMONG US (1946) substituting Hanna Schygulla for Hildegard Knef/Neff. VERONIKA VOSS contains visual and acoustic reminiscences of fifties melodrama and music, such as Preminger's THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN ARM (1955).
2. DIE EHE DER MARIA BRAUN. Series: Goldmann Pocket, 2nd edit. (Munich: Goldmann, 1979). With a "Nachbemerkung" by Zwerenz.
3. Richard Combs in his review speaks of a "mistake with a gas stove," *bfi: Monthly Film Bulletin of the British Film Institute*, Aug. 1980, p. 155. According to Hans-Dieter Seidel, *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, Feb. 22, 1979, "sprengt sie sich... einfach in die Luft," and Richard Greiner finds it simply impossible to believe in such an action, in "Screen Memories From Germany," *Commentary*, 69 (June 1980), 65-71, here: p. 67.
4. Interview. "Pressinformation. DIE EHE DER MARIA BRAUN." United Artists, Frankfurt, n.d., pp. 8-11. Here p. 9. Future short title: Interview UA.
5. This is the position taken by Richard Combs, *bfi*, Aug. 1980, p. 155, and by Robert Hatch, *The Nation* 229, No. 13, Oct. 27, 1979, 411-412.

The author owes thanks for helpful suggestions to Janet King Swaffar, John Hoberman, and Douglas Kellner, friends and distinguished colleagues.

The Last Temptation of Christ Spirit and flesh

by Lisa DiCaprio

from *Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, pp. 108-109

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1990, 2006

Despite its religious detractors, *THE LAST TEMPTATION* celebrates Christ's life. It affirms his teachings and sacrifice. In rather traditional terms, director Martin Scorsese depicts Christ's departure from basic tenets of Old Testament Judaism: Jesus' transformation of the angry and even wrathful God of the Israelites into a compassionate and merciful one embracing the entire human race, his condemnation of animal sacrifice and the money changers in the temple, and his opposition to open revolt as the only solution to the Roman domination of Israel. Instead, Jesus argues with Judas (Harvey Keitel) that love must replace hatred: "The circle of sin must be broken or else it will only be repeated." The soul, argues Jesus, is the foundation of the body — not the reverse, as Judas maintains.

For Scorsese, a Catholic, this film derives from his preoccupation with exploring the issues of sin and redemption in modern life, first exemplified in *MEAN STREETS*. So why all the furor? *THE LAST TEMPTATION* has received official condemnation from the Catholic Church, full-page ads in the *New York Times* by fundamentalist groups detailing "blasphemous" scenes in the film, and widespread protests, some aimed at stopping its production by Universal Pictures. In many ways, this protest replays (in a magnified way) the reaction which met the Greek publication of the Kazantzakis novel on which the screenplay is based. At that time, the Greek Orthodox Church attempted to excommunicate Kazantzakis, and in April of 1954, the Pope placed *The Last Temptation* on the Index of censored works.

What is new in *THE LAST TEMPTATION* cinematic version of the Christ story — and that which fundamentalists find most objectionable — is the process by which Christ finally accepts his role as redeemer of the human race. At the film's outset, we see a passage from the Prologue to the novel in which Kazantzakis states that all his life Christ has been consumed by the "incessant, merciless battle between the spirit and the flesh." This battle is at the center of *THE LAST TEMPTATION* and it is portrayed in fully human terms, including a dream sequence in which Christ (about to die on the cross) imagines himself being as the husband of Mary Magdalene (Barbara Hershey) and the father of several children, rather than being crucified on the cross.

This probing into Christ's personal life has received special attack. A protest leaflet

handed out in front of New York's Ziegfeld Theater condemns the film as an "indecent, audacious, insolent, arrogant and improper inquiry into the private, sacred life of Jesus." The private life of Jesus, however, is precisely what *THE LAST TEMPTATION* aims to explore, rather than repeat the sanitized version of Christ presented in such Biblical epics as last year's television special, *JESUS OF NAZARETH*.

In his introduction to one of Kazantzakis' earlier works, *THE SAVIORS OF GOD* (1927), Kimon Friar writes that Kazantzakis "had brooded long on the ultimate spiritual significance and martyrdom of Christ stripped of dogmatic and ceremonious ritual..." It is just such a Christ which we encounter in *THE LAST TEMPTATION* — one who is indecisive, fearful of dying, followed by shadows, and without a clear understanding of the mission assigned to him by God. "I am a liar, I am a hypocrite. I am afraid of everything. Lucifer is inside of men," states Jesus at a particularly anguished moment. He is even shown experiencing sexual fantasies about Mary Magdalene — considered a sin in the eyes of the Catholic Church.

By contrast, the film depicts Judas as sure of himself — a Zealot who criticizes Christ for making the crosses on which the Romans will crucify Jews accused of sedition. And Christ regards as Judas as the strongest of all his disciples the one on whom Christ must rely to betray him: "We're bringing God and man together. Without that there will be no redemption. You have to kill me."

Despite its reversing the traditional relationship between Christ and Judas, the film does not portray Christ simply as a weakling. Instead, Willem Dafoe (much acclaimed for his Christ-like performance as Sargeant in *PLATOON*) brings to Scorsese's Christ just the proper combination of divine inspiration and human weakness which the film demands. However, the portrayal of such weakness strikes at the very heart of the most enduring resolution of the paradox of Christ as both human and divine: the Augustinian view that Christ represented humanity in its perfected, rather than actual form.

Did Christ suffer as man or as God? Did he have "two natures" or one? How was the union of man and God in Christ to be interpreted? These questions the Church confronted in the first few centuries of its existence, as it consolidated itself ideologically and organizationally. In his recent study, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, historian and theologian Jaroslav Pelikan shows how the solution offered by St. Augustine was an idealization of Christ as man. Grappling with issues related to the fall of humanity, St. Augustine not only came up with the doctrine of original sin, but he also determined that "Jesus was, then, not only the image of divinity, but the image of humanity as it had originally been intended to be and as through him it could now become; he was in this sense the 'ideal man.'" Christ, according to Augustine, was human insofar as he was the Word made flesh, but his humanity reflected the future perfection of "man." In *THE LAST TEMPTATION*, the tables are turned on this concept of Christ one traditionally associated with Christianity. Instead, the film portrays Christ in two dimensions: as humanity is in its "fallen condition" and as humans can become through their belief in God. And the struggle between the spirit and the flesh — otherwise reserved for mere mortals — thereby become transferred to the figure of Christ himself.

Myths, as Joseph Campbell emphasized, need constant updating or they can lose

their meaning. As the film shows, this mythologizing began with the apostles themselves. In the film, for example, Paul confronts a living Christ who has renounced his mission, that Christ calls Paul's description of his crucifixion a lie: "I live like a man now. For the first time I enjoy it." Paul replies that the only hope for Christ's believers lies in the resurrected Jesus: "You started all this. Now you can't stop it. You don't know how much people need God. My Jesus is much more important and powerful than you."

In *THE LAST TEMPTATION*, the myth of Christ takes on a new and contemporary shape. The film depicts Christ almost as an anti-hero, whose final sacrifice is all the more meaningful because it comes as the product of intense personal struggle. As Christ finally acknowledges that the "guardian angel" who promised him life was really Satan in disguise, Christ asks for and receives a second chance. "It is accomplished," are Christ's final words when that moment arrives. Despite all previous vacillation, he dies as Christos Rex — Christ triumphant. In that moment, the narrative conclusion depends on a decidedly Christian ideal of sacrifice and spiritual transcendence which Scorsese's rightwing critics are unable (or unwilling) to appreciate.

Unfortunately, some of the film's power is diminished by its technical and conceptual weaknesses. At times the dialogue seems stilted and even undermines its own seriousness by playing on historical hindsight, as when the other apostles refer to Peter as "solid as a rock." On a visual level, the film degenerates into Hollywood extravaganza as it aims to capture certain Biblical highlights. Dafoe's distinctly Aryan features also detract from the film's faithfulness to time and place, although in this instance Scorsese is only following a long-standing artistic precedent of representing Christ through the blinders of Western white culture.

Overall, however, *THE LAST TEMPTATION* may very well represent the crowning of Scorsese's career. The film for the most part succeeds in challenging certain tenets of Christianity in order to capture what Scorsese considers to be Christianity's essence. Even non-believers and/or those raised outside of the Christian tradition stand to gain much from viewing the film. Although we may not share Kazantzakis' particular obsession with the mind/body split, we can all appreciate the desire to transform our ordinary existence — with all its material requirements — into something more meaningful than its own maintenance or reproduction. This, then, may be the real (Catholic as Universal) lesson of Christ's Passion which *THE LAST TEMPTATION* aims to convey: the desire and ability of each of us (as mortals) to transform that which decays and dies into something permanent, the mundane into the spiritual — the ordinary into the extraordinary.

[1]

NOTES

1. Coincidentally with the release of *THE LAST TEMPTATION*, new historical evidence indicates that Kazantzakis' rendition of a Christ who maintains an ascetic existence in order to fulfill his Christian mission (rather than out of any view that sexuality is sinful) may very well be close to historical reality. In *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, Elaine Pagels concludes that the concept of original sin (and all that it entails) overturned views held by early Christians on the relation between sexuality and moral freedom. Pagels contends that prior to Augustine, "Christians regarded freedom as the primary message of Genesis 1-3 [the story of Adam and Eve] —

freedom in its many forms, including free will, freedom from demonic powers, freedom from social and sexual obligations, freedom from tyrannical government and from fate; and self-mastery as the source of such freedom." Later, with Augustine, self-mastery as a basis for moral freedom was destroyed as "Adam's sin...corrupted our experience of sexuality (which Augustine tended to identify with original sin), and made us incapable of genuine political freedom." If Pagels is correct, THE LAST TEMPTATION may represent a rather brilliant example of art imitating life.

[To top](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)

The films of Patricia Gruben Subjectivity and space

by Kathleen McHugh

from *Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, pp. 110-116

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1990, 2006

A marked concern with space, often geographic space, informs the films of Patricia Gruben. A satellite photograph of the earth, maps, and floor plans figure prominently in her work. Her narratives (this term for lack of a better) invert the privilege that narrative cinema traditionally accords to time. Instead, they emphasize the space-geographic, cultural or textual-in which these narratives take place. Tensions in Gruben's films arise as human subjects are acted upon, conditioned or determined by their geographical surroundings. In *THE CENTRAL CHARACTER*, an amorphous protagonist — a housewife perhaps — disintegrates as her voice/ persona moves from the emphatically organized environment of the kitchen to the organic profusion of the garden. *SIFTED EVIDENCE* depends on a foreign geopolitical setting, Mexico, to structure its narrative and thematic concerns. Finally, in *LOW VISIBILITY*, Gruben draws on the hostile natural environment to explore a crisis between a languaged "civilized" subject and the needs of his body.

Yet Gruben's films pointedly are not naive re-workings of the age-old conflict described by the tired phrase, "Man (sic) against nature." Rather, her work opposes and exposes the fallacy underlying the construction of this conflict as it continually points to the textual, discursive aspects of spatial contexts. The earth, nature, our physical environment come replete with sciences (geography, architecture, astronomy) that articulate them and methodologies (cartography, photography, cinematography) that we use to represent them. In addition, Gruben underlines the fact that space is significant, it means, however much we take it for granted. Against the traditional organizing schemes of history and narrative in which a subject, temporally and progressively determined by events, moves through a background of neutral space, Gruben poses an alternative paradigm. Technically and narratively, she foregrounds the ways in which human subjects, narrative, and history cannot be separated from and indeed depend upon context, space and environment for a signifying/significant integrity.

Language, traditionally construed as the immanent mark of the human subject, as that which distinguishes us from objects, other life forms, and the environment, plays a crucial role in Gruben's films. She continually separates aural representations of her characters' dialogue and discourse from visual representations of their bodies. Thus language becomes an interface, a mediating

region between bodies and their surroundings. Often words, sounds, dialogues on the soundtrack indicate a subjective presence, but Gruben only depicts their locale. This technique works to erode the neat distinctions usually observed in cinema between subject and object, character and context, and as a consequence, challenges the privilege usually accorded to the first term in each of these pairs.

The title of Gruben's first film, *THE CENTRAL CHARACTER* (1977), indicates the terms of its own motive enigma. Focusing attention on food, both its preparation and growth, the film aligns two functionally similar yet structurally distinct spaces, the kitchen and the garden. It then traces its protagonist as she moves from the monotonous order of the former to the profuse, chaotic beauty of the latter. This protagonist never assumes a distinct, synched identity; rather, she takes on the "character" of her surroundings. In the kitchen and the garden, she concerns herself with order and cleanliness. Once in the garden, however, her character becomes diffuse and wild; she literally revels in dirt.

Gruben uses primarily verbal and architectural texts to render the domestic space of the kitchen. The film opens with a woman reciting a grocery list on the soundtrack as a text scrolling up on a black screen describes her struggle with two bulky grocery bags on her way into the house. This scrolling text recurs, intercut with images, giving us fragmentary descriptions of events and chores that structure a woman's domestic existence. All these chores involve a struggle between food and dirt, cleanliness and disorder. Over a floorplan of the kitchen's layout, superimposed titles state, "Entropy is the main problem in the modern kitchen, regulating traffic flow, keeping fingerprints, food particles and other unhygienic intruders out. A nucleus of order must be maintained. A kitchen is white steel and chrome for earlier detection. Why is it that disorder is more contagious?" A subsequent text notes that as the woman goes to fix herself a meal, she must be very careful "to remove all the grit"; a recipe scrolls up on the screen, then instructions for sprouting potatoes. The woman's proclivity for cultivation proves to be her undoing. Utilizing a poetic logic, Gruben plays the organic implications of the word "cultivation" (as vegetal growth) off against its culturally oriented meaning involving refinement and polish. The next text informs us that the potatoes exhibited "phenomenal growth" and "overtook the kitchen." To get to her cupboard, the woman "had to pull roots off the cupboard door." The last text in the film has the flavor of a fairytale. Needing to find more containers for her plants, it says, the woman ventures into the woods, sprinkling seeds behind her to mark her way home. The birds eat the seeds.

The printed passages that punctuate these initial sequences of *THE CENTRAL CHARACTER* trace the movement toward disorder of all of its elements. From the straightforward description that opens the film to the clinical treatise on the horrors of entropy and the reassuring order of the recipe, these texts slip into a fantastic narration that details the transformation, the disordering of a certain milieu and of the character that inhabits and maintains that milieu.

The images that attend these texts initially serve to illustrate them. Following the passage on entropy, we see a hand scrubbing a dirty footprint off a floor. The early sequences of the film present the woman as merely an agent of order; we never see her. Stills of a broom sweeping a patio, the hand scrubbing the floor, a voice observing that the patio must be swept "every day" denote her presence. Time lapse

photography of wildly growing roots ironically illustrate her remark, "The natural world takes dictation from scientific order." The first visual representation of her lying in a bathtub with a fern frond dangling down toward her floating hair marks the turn towards disorder. The organic world invades, contaminates the domestic. The woman goes to the woods to search for more "containers."

In the latter half of the film, compelling, enigmatic visuals predominate. No texts order this world, and the woman's aural presence, her voice, merges with the cacaphony of the outdoors. Overexposed, high contrast film footage finds her lying in the mud, initially indistinguishable from the ground, perhaps drinking water from a puddle. Discovered by the camera, she bounds off, her white clothing patterned with dirt stains. She peruses domestic junk scattered in a field as a voice repeats incessantly, "I would like to say that I would like to say that..." Meaning becomes a mantra, a drone blending in with the sounds of frogs and insects. Hemmed by foliage, she sets a mock table, placing a worm and a frog on a plate as an almost incoherent, reverberating voice delimits the proper place for knives and spoons.

The lush visual beauty of the ending of THE CENTRAL CHARACTER undercuts the order that dominated the film's beginning. The drudge and monotony of the domestic becomes exotic as it dissipates in the aural, vegetal riot of the outdoors. And the elusive central character? Originally constituted as an ordered, ordering function in the kitchen, the woman disintegrates into an organic effect, a liberated growth that exceeds the constraints, the original context or containers of her own cultivation.

Moving from the poetic evocation of domestic and rural space depicted in THE CENTRAL CHARACTER, Gruben works with a coherent narrative and larger increments of geographic, here politicized, space in her second film. Midway through SIFTED EVIDENCE (1982), the narrator remarks "The history of Mexico can be seen as a series of superimpositions..." Significantly, the phrase articulates history in spatial terms and resonates with the archaeological emphasis in the film. The evidence sifted from the dust of ruins provides material artifacts which verify and support the abstract, temporal construct we call history. In addition, the notion of superimposition informs the film at every level — technical, narrative and ideological — and operates as a master trope in this film's meditation on vision, representation and reading as they are inflected and distorted by the place/position of the viewer.

The film begins with a text scrolling as the first of two female narrators reads, "For a few people, the center of this vast globe is a tiny village located near the Mexican gulf coast once known as Tlatilco. This village died out nearly 3000 years ago and no longer appears on modern maps. But to reach that spot, we must proceed from where we are at the moment." The title appears to the sound of airplane engines, and then we see a satellite camera view of "this vast globe" sighted through crosshairs. Over these visuals, the narrator prescribes rules for accurate vision through a lens.

"First priority is to fix the frame, to line the crosshairs as accurately as possible, to set the zoom. Hesitation in the moving hand will cause retrograde motion in the elements or a slight deflection in the field of vision but strict attention to the crosshairs is the guiding principle to

correct the spiral of a wandering attention."

These two opening shots, containing respectively verbal and visual representations of "this vast globe," approach their mutual subject very differently. The first shot, in a descriptive mode, announces the film's story while the second introduces its structural and self-reflexive concerns, couched in a prescription for proper viewing. The written text identifies a particular location vital to the narrative — it places us within the film — while the second shot, in its concern with focus and vision, seems indirectly to address our placement as spectators outside it.

A disjunctive stream of images follows, held together by the continuous narration which begins to describe the trip to Mexico. From an aerial perspective, we see a body of water, a coastline, the small huts of a village. With no cinematic punctuation, this film sequence takes on a slide-show format illustrating the Virgin Mary's successful invasion of primitive Mexican religion. The narrator remarks that the "chaste" Christian imagery of Mary replaced the icon of an Aztec goddess of fertility. The descriptive and prescriptive discursive modes heard just before in the film's opening sequences now recur as shifting moods in this slide presentation. Initially the narrator introduces the lecture on the Virgin Mary in an explanatory context; her interest in female divinities of ancient Mexico has led her to make this trip, and the Virgin Mary provides the contemporary trace of these ancient goddesses. But her voice quickly becomes polemical. Alluding to the imperialism of Christianity in New World countries, she notes dryly that the spiritual traits of mercy and sacrifice expounded by missionaries were "useful lessons for a conquered race," and ultimately translate into "our mercy, their sacrifice."

Yet as she is developing the argument, the content of the slides changes and another salient political concern makes its way into this discourse on racial oppression. After we see a slide showing a statue of the Virgin Mary in front of a billboard where a woman's body advertises beer, the narrator discusses the problem of a woman travelling alone in a foreign country. "We must always remember the power of archetypes. We have no biographies on the street beyond present behavior." Over images of women sitting on park benches, talking at tables, or shots of their fragmented bodies (a sandalled foot, an elbow), she says, "We are all billboards on the street." She relates that the men in Mexico all called her "la huera, the blonde, in an insulting way"; she associates this derogatory appellation both with her gender and her privileged status as a foreign tourist who has "the time and the money for adventure." This voice-over effectively complicates the issues of racial and sexual oppression, issues perhaps embedded in the Virgin's icon. It poses them in an ambiguous relation to one another, crosses them as it were. As if to demonstrate this dilemma, the narrator then tells the story of a Canadian woman who was kidnapped and held for several days in a remote village. The camera scans a primitive map of a Mexican landscape as the narrator says, "The man who took her didn't understand her words, mistook her curiosity for desire. Who knows what they finally meant to each other."

From this anecdotal digression, the woman then explicates the series of slides that follow. They depict two-faced or two-headed female figures which were discovered in the ruins at Tlatilco. She wonders, "Why the double images?" and as the camera pans across a bookshelf, she confesses, "I felt that old Teutonic fascination, the body and the spirit, immanence and transcendence, the gap that can never be

closed by analysis." She decides that, because of her interest in the doubled figures at Tlatilco, she will try to find this place. The image fades as we hear the sounds of a slide projector being turned off and a light switch being turned on.

Heretofore only an authoritative voice over the film's introduction, the narrator finally appears in one of only two scenes in *SIFTED EVIDENCE* with synched sound and visuals. The camera surveys her room, the pictures on the wall, the open suitcase on the bed, as the woman discusses ancient rituals of female sacrifice. The camera finally reaches and rests on her face. Looking directly into the lens, the woman says that she made several attempts to get the ruins but it was difficult to find out where they were and it was very difficult for her to get around. She turns on a Spanish language tape and, crossing the room, removes three souvenirs — a bus ticket, a statuette and a bunch of flowers — from her suitcase. "These items," she says, "represent adventure, mystery and romance; they are marks of voluntary bondage." The visuals fade.

A new female voice dictates the internal narrative of *SIFTED EVIDENCE*. This narrative acts out or re-presents all the topics, problems and plots presented in the introductory sequences. The protagonist "Maggie" doubles for the first narrator. She wants to get to the ruins of Tlatilco; she travels, initially, alone. Like the Canadian woman who was kidnapped, Maggie "cannot observe herself from far enough away to stay out of trouble," and she finds herself in an awkward position with a Mexican man she meets. As this relationship is reenacted or dramatized, an earlier question resurfaces, "Who knows what they finally meant to each other."

Gruben tends to introduce her characters aurally and then to follow with visuals, if at all. Maggie and Jim Lilly's story begins as we watch visuals presumably from their point of view of a Mexican town, then successive dissolves of the countryside from a moving vehicle, presumably a bus. The voice-over states that he has offered to show Maggie around, to act as her guide. Maggie tries to describe the face that would go with the name "Jim Lilly." She is suspicious of his motives, but reluctantly accepts his help.

Maggie and Jim make their first appearance literally superimposed on a rear projection image of a country road. They stand awkwardly side by side, both facing the camera as the voice-over discusses their positions. "She should be at right angles to him from now on as he filters all her data; he knows the language." Here, the narrator attempts to impose a spatial configuration ("right angles") on the protagonists' positions. Their disparate relations to their geographical surroundings, the artificial "setting" of the latter pointedly underscored by the rear projection technique, serves to structure their relationship. He acts as her filter, sifts or strains her incoming "data." To a certain extent, he controls or influences her perspective, as when he lectures her about her revealing bathing suit.

She, a well-educated woman, has come to Mexico to do feminist research on certain ancient artifacts; to her, this country is a text that she approaches with a very clearly delimited set of ideas and pre-suppositions. Tlatilco interests her because the evidence she has every indication of finding there will verify an already formulated worldview. She will and, if we consider the introductory sequences of the film, already has imposed a certain interpretation on the Mexican figures, the events of her journey, the Mexican man. Her gender, her cultural background, her politics at once constitute her focus, so necessary for any sighting, while they

simultaneously preclude the possibility of any undistorted vision. Yet, she cannot negotiate the foreign terrain, cannot locate the site. Not knowing the land or the language, she must depend on a man, her filter, to show her around, however much she might suspect his motives.

Although her trip "was organized around trips to the ruins," Maggie (also the original narrator) never makes it there. The narrative finally devolves around the rapport, or lack of it, between Maggie and Jim Lilly. Ultimately, the evidence we must sift through concerns the tension elicited from their conflicting representations of what is ostensibly the "same" story. The viewpoint of Jim Lilly AKA Charlie, although mediated through the woman's voice-over narration, presents a perspective that differs from, if it does not overtly challenge, Maggie's point of view.

Initially Charlie presents himself as Jim Lilly, a major league baseball player who did time for writing bad checks. Later, in a scene in which he confronts her, he admits to Maggie that he constructed this myth, but he chides her for not realizing that all his friends call him Charlie and have done so in front of her. "You didn't even notice." He considers himself a "people person" while she "has her head in a book all the time." He tells her that she doesn't know where she's going, that she didn't even notice when they drove right past the ruins she was seeking. While he tells her these things, she fiddles with her expensive camera.

Maggie's Teutonic background: At one point, she thinks about her father, relates an anecdote of his childhood in Bremen. A bit later on the soundtrack, a voice recites fragments of a Rilke poem. Sometimes Maggie dreams in German. Although her German heritage would seem to have little to do with her vision, a comment by Charlie brings them together. As he is trying to feed the nauseous Maggie an enchilada, he says to her, "You're a German, just close your eyes." His comment, with its very obvious historical allusions, implies that her obliviousness constitutes a significant moral flaw and one that involves racial oppression. She doesn't notice that his friends call him Charlie because she's only interested in what he can do for her, not in who he is. Charlie's reading of their relationship on racial lines neatly matches and problematizes her gender-oriented perspective of it.

The visuals for the Maggie/Charlie story consistently emphasize the artificiality of its representation. Gruben consistently employs rear projection and, in one sequence, uses a painted backdrop to stage a scene. The often disjunctive spatial planes that comprise the mise-en-scene emphasize the fact that context too is a representational construct. The narrator's voice-over adds another level of distancing and artifice. The narrative of SIFTED EVIDENCE does not happen, unfold before us, wrapped in illusory claims to realism. Rather, a voice which we recognize as biased tells us the story. Gruben does not allow us to forget that the narrative evidence we receive is always being re-presented. In addition, SIFTED EVIDENCE consistently presents narrative detail or evidence that derives from more than one voice or source. Sometimes the voice-over and the visuals appear completely unrelated to one another, as when the narrator reports that the angle of Maggie's shoulders should let Charlie know she wants to travel alone and the visuals depict a door and a fork in a country road. Sometimes they are absolutely "consistent" as when we see Charlie's lips mouth the words the narrator reports that he is saying. The characters never actually speak in synch sound in a "synched"

(non-artificial) mise-en-scene-with one exception.

In their last encounter with one another, Charlie and Maggie come to blows. She attempts to leave her motel room. He stops her and throws her on the bed. She bites him. The only time they physically touch, in this scene, they also speak directly to one another. The absence of the narrator's voice makes this scene seem shocking and out of place. He tells her that he wants her "off his back" and that he's going to make sure she gets on the bus in the morning. She replies, "Can't I put myself on the bus?" He retorts that he doesn't think she's learned how to do that yet.

Their dialogue stands in direct opposition to their former behavior. She has been incapable of getting around without him. He has sought out her company. They both seem to be lying. The film that provides the context for this scene also undermines its validity in a representational sense. The realistic conventions that inform it become apparent when juxtaposed with the modes of presentation used in the scenes that precede it. The film thereby presents diegetic realism as just another mode of representation with no privileged claim to truth.

Gruben's multi-faceted play with misc-en-scene acts out the problems of perspective presented in the story of Maggie and Charlie. We must arbitrarily choose which representative mode, if any, we will take as the legitimate one. In an analogous hermeneutic dilemma, Charlie and Maggie's points of view cross, intersect, foil one another and any reading we might have of their conflict. Gruben doesn't opt to resolve the oppositions embodied in these two characters (body/spirit, German/Mexican, male/female) by a convenient narrative synthesis. Charlie and Maggie, for example, do not fall in love. Their story simply ends, unresolved. A theoretical, feminist reading of SIFTED EVIDENCE would obviate the historical and cultural aspects of Mexico and the iconography of women in that culture. A reading along historical/cultural lines that would find Maggie's behavior, indeed the film overall, "racist" leaves women imprisoned in the sexist ideologies embedded in this culture's heritage.

Maggie and Charlie's relationship and the strains within it quickly foreground a dilemma involving political positions and perspectives, a dilemma which ultimately faces the spectator of this film. In the situation which develops between Maggie and Charlie, one which calls into question racial and sexual rights, depicts racist and sexist attitudes and fashions these issues in such a way that an interpretation of racial injustice precludes a feminist interpretation and vice-versa, how do we, the spectators, read, how do we judge? SIFTED EVIDENCE skillfully poses these questions and just as skillfully refuses any simple answer to them. If we judge Maggie to be racist or Charlie to be sexist, the film demands that we realize our reading is based on a point of view that inherently suppresses another's reading.

Finally, the adage that one must pay "close attention to the crosshairs" nicely collapses a demand for focus with a critique of self-reflexivity, for our awareness of our own theoretical, political, visual perspectives does not alleviate the consequent perceptual distortion resulting from it. SIFTED EVIDENCE construes perception within the enigma of the figure and ground. Foreground, background — when a subject focuses on one, the other becomes its context and vice-versa. Neither has any independent significance. The film inscribes its spectator's position at the intersecting point of two perpendicular or opposed lines; confronted with the

crosshairs and their subject, we can only ponder the riddle of their irresolvable relation.

LOW VISIBILITY (1984), Patricia Gruben's first feature film, combines the strategies and strengths of her two earlier works. Visually stunning like THE CENTRAL CHARACTER, it also concerns a protagonist lost in a linguistic twilight provoked by the natural environment. But this film treats the language loss as pathological rather than liberating. LOW VISIBILITY shares with SIFTED EVIDENCE a concern with media and perspective and uses narrative to explore these issues. The poetic elusiveness of Gruben's first film, and her studious avoidance of narrative resolution in her second, find expression in the plot structure of LOW VISIBILITY, for it treats of what becomes in her hands an unsolvable mystery. Borrowed from a real-life account of a plane crash survivor who feeds on the remains of his fellow passengers to stay alive, the plot of LOW VISIBILITY deals with a man found wandering alone in the snow in a park in British Columbia. Apparently suffering from amnesia and aphasia, he can only utter profanities. A barrage of institutions — the media, the medical community and the police — bring their resources to bear on solving his case.

Who is he? Where did he come from? To all queries, Mr. Bones, as he is later dubbed by his nurses, can only stutter "fffucking asshole" or some variation thereof. His language disorder renders him an impenetrable, utterly enigmatic subject. The sociopolitical order demands an identity and an origin for all its inhabitants. In the case of Mr. Bones, who is discovered without any identification, the media and the police initially appear powerless. In the film's second sequence, a reporter pushes his way into the ambulance where Mr. Bones sits on a stretcher, saying, "Hold on! He's not dying or anything. Let me get a story." He aggressively demands of Mr. Bones, "What is your name? Have you been out here long? What happened?" Mr. Bones only swears at him, and frustrated, the reporter shrugs and says irritably to the camera, "Oh forget it, Sandy. We can't use this on the six o'clock news. We'll just get some hospital shots and do a voice-over."

The police are equally callous. Over visuals of nurses helping Mr. Bones into bed, a hushed dialogue occurs in the hallway between a doctor and Sergeant Nimitz. The investigator says, "They couldn't really give me anything on him downstairs, his name, anything. I wonder if you'd just let me go in there and get a start on his file." The doctor refuses repeatedly despite Nimitz's claim to special "approaches" to make people talk. As the press cannot get his story nor the police coerce it from him, the task of discovering Mr. Bones' identity, of telling his story falls upon the medical community. The narrative thus functionally collapses a clinical therapeutic process with the hermeneutic demands of the plot. Doctors become detectives.

As in SIFTED EVIDENCE, this film refuses to privilege any particular point of view. The eyes and the media through which we see Mr. Bones constantly shift. The film opens with a sequence shot through the windshield of a moving car. The women in the car spot Mr. Bones staggering down a snowy embankment and out onto the road. We never see these women, but we hear them disagree about whether to stop or not. The driver, who doesn't want to, wins out, "He might be dangerous." The car passes Mr. Bones. The screen fades to black. The sequences with the reporter and the investigator follow, also punctuated by these noticeable fades, which mark off many of the sequences in the film. Gruben thus emphasizes

the fragmentary, incremental character of this narrative. Stories, speculations, a clinical case history aggregate around the silent center inhabited by Mr. Bones. Everyone wants to explicate him, to render him coherent. They want to penetrate, permeate him with language. One of his physicians, a Dr. Pearl, who tries to make him put a face on a Mr. Potato Head says, "I just want to know how far we have to go to get you back here with us." Mr. Bones responds by slapping the plastic eyes, ears and mouth into his plate of food, a legitimate answer to Pearl's question but one too literal for the doctor to understand.

Much of the footage in *LOW VISIBILITY* depicts Mr. Bones' clinical experience, an experience utterly mediated technically, linguistically and narratively. A video camera in his room constantly monitors his behavior, and Gruben switches our perspective of him back and forth from the black and white video monitor to the film camera in the room. The video camera films the film crew filming Mr. Bones. A reporter interviews Dr. Korona who explicates the jargon of his trade. Gruben even exposes the mediation of cinematic narration itself; over a still of Mr. Bones, a voiceover explains the Kuleshov effect, a perceptual phenomenon exploited in film editing to suggest affective states.

Narratively, Mr. Bones' relations with the hospital staff reflect different therapeutic perspectives that seem to divide along gendered, hierarchical lines. His two female nurses play word games with him, tell him inane jokes, steal crayons for him. They report dreaming about him, as they dream about all their patients, dream that they can speak. They touch him, and he responds to their treatment. He takes on the name the nurses give him, later angrily telling a male doctor his name is "Bones!"

Mr. Bones has sessions with the male doctors. They conduct tests on him, do speech therapy, use and withhold food from him to elicit his cooperation in their therapy. They act businesslike, professional in all their interactions with him, and they sometimes become impatient when he doesn't respond as they would like him to. Many of the tasks they want him to perform involve food. It is the first word Dr. Korona tries to teach him to say. One of the games he plays with his patient requires Mr. Bones to pick out the object among several that "you can eat." These tests initially appear innocent. As this plot about cannibalism unfolds, however, they acquire a sadistic significance.

A second investigation counterpoints the relentless clinical assault on Mr. Bones' psyche. Gruben, exploiting every possible instance and meaning of the word "media," executes a sort of pun in adding a psychic medium to the cast of characters. The psychic never actually meets Bones but rather "haunts" the official investigation. Gruben introduces her in a striking image. A woman's hands move lightly, slowly across a map as she says, "I see rocks...trees, lots of snow...I'm up high, looking down. There's a burn patch on the ground..." Always filmed from a subjective camera position, the psychic flies over the crash site in a helicopter, murmurs trance-like over a photograph of Mr. Bones. She camps in the woods near the wreckage and, in a slow motion, visually distorted sequence (a dream, a hallucination?), she comes across ripped pieces of the fuselage as she hears fragments of a conversation between the two men who survived the crash.

The psychic's search always involves incidental or contextual material as she cannot get inside Mr. Bones. She wonders if he's "blocking her" because when she gets "near him, it's all garbled inside." Her perspective, represented by voiceovers

and subjective shots, begins to invade and "read" occurrences in the hospital. Musing over a police photo of the crash site, she challenges the police report that the two men and the woman in the ill-fated plane were killed on impact. Her interpretation of the events comes to be more and more privileged by the film. In one scene, the camera slowly pans across the screens of several video monitors, each depicting a perspective of Mr. Bones. One replays a therapy session with Dr. Korona, the next Sergeant Nimitz talking with him. On the next monitor, a newscaster, standing in the park where Mr. Bones was found, reports that the condition of the bodies at the crash site 'raises new questions for the police.' The psychic sits at the last monitor, watching a TV commercial, visually equated with the other investigator/ narrators of Mr. Bones' case.

Through the many information sources in the film, we learn that two of the survivors' bodies were eaten, probably by Mr. Bones. Contingent questions become important. Were the other people in the plane alive or dead after the crash? Did Mr. Bones kill them? Near the end of the film, Sergeant Nimitz confronts Mr. Bones with a log found at the crash site. In elliptical terms, he accuses Mr. Bones certainly of cannibalism, possibly of murder. He tells Mr. Bones, "Everyone's known about this for a long time." The police and the doctors were only waiting "to see if you'd admit to it." The sergeant never articulates exactly what Mr. Bones should admit to, and the account with which he confronts Mr. Bones is riddled with inconsistencies. When Mr. Bones attempts to speak, however, the investigator interrupts and silences him. "You don't have to say anything. We know it was you." The details gleaned from the psychic's insight that contradict Nimitz's interpretation together with the questions he himself asks and then dismisses unanswered utterly confound the denouement of *LOW VISIBILITY*. Sergeant Nimitz declares, "It all fits together," as if his pronouncement were sufficient. He and Dr. Korona practice a sadistic hermeneutics; they impose their account on the stupified Mr. Bones. In the end, even the psychic's voice is undercut. Over the last shot in the film, an aerial view, flying, the psychic "talks" with the nurse killed in the crash. She tells her "It's you I want, you know. He was just all we had...the alive one." The psychic finishes by telling the nurse, "You don't need to talk now."

Mr. Bones functions in *LOW VISIBILITY* as a pretense for discourse. Narrative, legal, and clinical systems abduct him, fill his silence with their voices, forcefully make him their subject. The media, the psychic, police, medical personnel frame him, indict him in their own discursive constructions. Finally madman, victim, garbled body, Mr. Bones becomes a mediated event seen through eyes whose vision is always partially, if not wholly, obscured.

LOW VISIBILITY succeeds in developing and realizing Gruben's formal and thematic concerns more fully than either of her previous works. Both visually captivating and theoretically sophisticated, it apprehends a certain malaise or paradox of subjectivity without being overly analytical or didactic. The film constitutes Mr. Bones as a skeleton or context to depict/delimit the construction of a subject. The drama, the narrative obliterates the very possibility of any Cartesian clarity as objective facts and subjective accounts in *LOW VISIBILITY* are utterly inter-contaminated. Context, linguistic and spatial environments, media, the camera's lens become the subject; they invade a silent, helpless body, enacting the process any subject must experience to get, to be "back here with us."

I wish to give special thanks to Claudia Gorbman for her assistance in the preparation of this article.

[To top](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)

Watsonville on Strike Reflexivity and conflict

by Geoffrey Dunn

from *Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, pp. 117-120

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1990, 2006

Jon Silver's powerful new documentary, *WATSONVILLE ON STRIKE* opens with a classic *mise-en-scène* of cinematic reflexivity. The setting is a Teamsters union hail, where dozens of mostly Mexican cannery workers are standing on one side of the room confronting local union president Fred Heim. Straight out of central casting as the prototypical bad guy, the gruff-and-burly Heim turns to the camera and demands that the film crew leave the premises. Director (and cinematographer) Silver, speaking in Spanish, asks the cannery workers from behind the camera if he can stay. "Si, si!" they shout in unison.

Heim, obviously unable to understand the language of the workers he represents, thrusts his arm out at the crowd and declares in English that they aren't even members of the Union. Silver translates Heim's remarks. The workers are outraged. "Our union dues pay your salary," one of them retorts in Spanish. Red-faced and losing control, Heim steps threateningly towards the camera, and with his finger thrust at the lens, shouts out at Silver, "If you put me on TV, I'll sue ya." Cut and take.

The scene not only establishes many of the larger themes that are later addressed in the film (i.e., Mexican-born workers being represented by white union officials unable to communicate with their own rank-and-file; the workers refusing to be denied their rights), but it also establishes the tone and temper of the film, its conscious reflexivity^[1][\[open notes in new window\]](#) and its political point of view. The film is obviously about conflict — economic, cultural, political, even moral — and the filmmaker has clearly chosen sides; he is, in fact, an actor in the struggle, an unabashed partisan.^[2] There is no pretense of objectivity; this is not the nightly news.

For those unfamiliar with the events covered in the film, in September of 1985, over 1,500 Teamster-organized cannery workers walked out on the two largest frozen food companies in the United States — Watsonville Canning and Richard A. Shaw Frozen Foods. The strike became a national *cause célèbre* for U.S. leftists and served as a bitter reflection of corporate agribusiness run amok.

Located at the head of the agriculturally-rich Salinas Valley in Central California,

the city of Watsonville has a population of roughly 30,000 and is promoted by the local Chamber of Commerce as "The Frozen Food Capital of the World." In fact, over half of the nation's frozen fruits and vegetables are processed in this relatively small coastal burg by a total workforce of 5,000, all of whom work in less than a dozen plants.

WATSONVILLE ON STRIKE traces the less-than-noble history of union organizing in California canneries, one that led in the 1940s and 50s to a series of sweetheart contracts with the notoriously conservative International Brotherhood of Teamsters, who were viewed by cannery owners as preferable to the more radical and militant CIO unions then attempting to secure contracts. The result was a pro-business, rubber-stamp Teamster leadership whose ideology and interests mirrored those of the cannery owners and the rest of the white, bourgeois power structure in Watsonville. For decades, in fact, Watsonville Teamster Local No. 912 was run as a virtual private business, its officials amassing vast amounts of personal wealth at the expense of the workers they were charged to represent.

By the 1980's, however, the legitimacy of the union hierarchy was beginning to crumble. Organizing under the banner of the nationally-based Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), a small band of radical white Teamster members began to politicize the rank-and-file and draw attention to the various inadequacies of the local's leadership.

At the same time, overproduction and foreign competition were beginning to put strains on Watsonville's once thriving frozen food industry. In 1982, the largest of the city's frozen food processors, Watsonville Canning, cut wages by 40 cents per hour and established an even sweeter sweetheart contract with the Teamsters, one that provided them with a decided advantage against their other local competitors. Three years later, when Shaw Frozen Foods announced a similar cut-back, Watsonville Canning stunned the community by attempting to establish a base pay of nearly half of what it had been in real dollars just three years before. Workers were outraged. The strike was on — and it was to go on and on, for five months at Shaw's and for over a year-and-a-half at Watsonville Canning.[3]

One of the primary strengths of WATSONVILLE ON STRIKE is that it portrays the ideological and tactical complexities of the 19-month struggle; in other words, it doesn't gloss over the rank-and-file divisions in an often seen cinematic shorthand that casts the owners as the bad guys and the workers as proletarian saints. Not that the cannery owners aren't generally nasty; they are. But there are also plenty of black hats (and some grey ones, too) worn by those theoretically on the side of the workers, the aforementioned Fred Heim and his Teamster cronies among them.

From the beginning, WATSONVILLE ON STRIKE makes clear that the supposedly neutral U.S. political system was cast against the strikers. The Watsonville Police Department vigorously enforced a series of injunctions imposed by the courts, continually harassed strikers and their supporters, and, dressed as they were in assorted riot gear and military regalia, maintained the threat of violence throughout the strike. WATSONVILLE ON STRIKE contains numerous verité scenes of police confrontations with strikers and vividly depicts their clear-cut role in protecting bourgeois interests.

In the early days of the strike, TDU radicals provided leadership and direction to the walkout. In October they organized a mass rally called Solidarity Day, which drew over 2,000 strikers and strike supporters from throughout Northern California. The march was the largest ever in Watsonville's history — and it was directed against both the plant owners and the local Teamster officials, who had refused to endorse or participate in the demonstration.

As *WATSONVILLE ON STRIKE* delineates, however, the unity displayed in Solidarity Day was something of a facade. Although respected by many of the strikers, TDU's leaders were culturally isolated from the majority of Latina strikers and were never able to establish a mass base for their organization. TDU itself was also divided about which direction the strike should take. In the wake of both this internal ambivalence and lukewarm rank-and-file support for TDU, more moderate organizers were able to put together a middle-of-the-road organization, which included Teamster officials, a substantial number of women strikers and outside labor activists from Northern California. With a couple of notable exceptions, this so-called Strikers Committee was able to maintain leadership for the remainder of the struggle, while TDU was reduced to a secondary role, that of voicing dissent.

Cut to Sergio Lopez. In many ways he comes across as the most frustrating, complex, and, at times, despicable figure in Silver's film. Bilingual and Mexican-born, Lopez served for years as a point man for the local Teamster hierarchy. Whenever there was trouble brewing in the canneries among the Mexican women, the Union honchos sent Lopez in to smooth things over. He often portrayed himself as a man caught in the middle ("My hands are tied," was a favorite expression), and he soon earned the nickname "mil mascarar" (a thousand masks). When the strike began, Lopez took up the official Teamster line and refused to endorse the Solidarity Day demonstration (though he himself showed up at it); with the emergence of a middle force, however, and the decline of TDU, the Strikers Committee had found a new leader.

Four months into the strike, the Teamsters held local elections for union officials. Grown weary of the struggle and unable to compromise with their politicized rank-and-file, the longtime white union officials called it a career, and with left opposition, fractured, Lopez swept unopposed into the leadership of the local.

One of the new leader's first actions was to secure a settlement at Shaw Frozen Foods, even though it meant accepting \$1.21 per hour pay cut. The Shaw settlement temporarily diffused the strike, leaving angry and disenchanted workers at Watsonville Canning alone in their walkout. They nonetheless dug in, re-organized and became even more solidified in their struggle; not a single striker ever crossed the picket line in the ensuing 14 months of the strike.

WATSONVILLE ON STRIKE is at its best in chronicling both the hardships of the strikers and the powerful spirit and tenacity they continually manifested to overcome their many difficulties. We see striking women organizing a food bank to supplement the strikers' meager \$55-per-week strike benefits; we see them holding holiday celebrations — at Thanksgiving, Christmas and Halloween — and we also see the pain they experience knowing that their children are going hungry and watching them being evicted from their home for lack of rent. We feel their anger and bitterness as they watch scabs brought into work at the plant. "It hurts to see

them going in there," declares one of the strikers, the pain on her face saying much more than her words ever could.

There were times when the strike also began to take on a circus quality, as political celebrities began making obligatory pilgrimages to Watsonville and certified *la huelga* as a media event. United Farm Workers' president Cesar Chavez makes an impromptu appearance in the film cheering on the strikers, but then is embarrassingly ambivalent when asked if his union would support the striking cannery workers with a walkout of its own. At a later rally ten months into the strike, Jesse Jackson arrives in town and declares, "Watsonville is to economic justice what Selma, Alabama, was to political justice. These women are striking for all of us." Afterwards, Jackson gives one of the strikers an obligatory peck on the cheek. The shot, which Silver lets roll at wide-angle and without comment, is both touching and troubling at the same time; it's a fine line between support and opportunism.

In spite of the national attention the strike was receiving, a resolution was not at hand. The walkout continued on past a year, past a year-and-a-half. Finally, in the late winter of 1987, first a crack, then a huge crevice developed in the economic foundation of Watsonville Canning. Unable to produce with an unstable and, more importantly, an unskilled scab workforce, the processing plant was forced to survive on a line of credit (\$18 million worth) provided at the start of the strike by Wells Fargo Bank. After a local boycott and added pressure from the national Teamsters Union, Wells Fargo finally called in the loan, and just like that Watsonville Canning went bankrupt. Originally, the company had set out to break the union; instead, the union workers had broken the company.

The strike was not over yet. A new consortium, headed by a millionaire spinach grower named David Gill, purchased the processing plant from Wells Fargo immediately after the bankruptcy. But as one of the picketing strikers declares in the film, "If they buy the company, they buy the strike, too." Not wanting to undertake a prolonged labor battle that would immediately cripple his fledgling operation, Gill negotiated a contract with Teamster leader Lopez. It appeared that the strike might finally be at an end.

Surprise. The proposed contract hammered out by Gill and Lopez not only called for a significant wage cut, but it also took away health care benefits for a rank-and-file composed of mostly working mothers. Although strongly endorsed by both the Teamsters union and the Strikers Committee, the contract was bitterly opposed by a majority of the striking workers and by TDU's Joe Fahey, recently elected to the low-level position of Business Agent in the Teamster local. When the union officially declared the strike over, the rank-and-file staged an emotionally-charged wildcat strike specifically over the issue of benefits. The wildcat included a moving, almost tragic *peregrinación*[4] that rekindled public support for the strikers and forced Gill to include benefits in the contract offer. Another vote was taken: at long last, the strike was over.

While the Teamsters and Strikers Committee claimed victory, *WATSONVILLE ON STRIKE* is careful to point out that the final settlement was a mixed bag. After 19 months of lost wages, only half of the strikers actually went back to work and at a significant wage reduction at that.

Rather than close on a dramatically satisfying note of a worker's victory, Silver chose to interview strikers at a barbecue three weeks after the settlement. The film's final political assessment of the events it covers is thus more complicated — more theoretically sophisticated, if you will — than most left documentaries,[5] precisely because it allows for a complexity of views to be aired by its protagonists. One of the workers half-heartedly calls the strike a "victory," while another emphasizes with conviction that they had won back their benefits while their pay had been cut. Still another says bitterly, "We're being paid a scab's wage."

The film also points out that the strike's ultimate worth cannot be tallied merely in dollars and cents. "Before, we were afraid (to struggle)," says one striker. "Now we are not afraid. We know that we have the right to struggle ...I learned that I could speak out wherever I want."

The potential power of this politicization is a constant sub-theme of the film. At each crucial juncture in the walkout, the strikers are presented with a range of options: whenever they succumb to the moderate forces within the Teamsters and the Strikers Committee, compromises are made that cut away at both their power and their pocketbooks; when they assert themselves and strike out on their own, however, (as in the case of the final benefit demands) they eventually are reckoned with by the power structure. Just how much better off the strikers would now be had they taken the more radical road of the TDU activist cannot be honestly assessed from the film, but there is a telling, climatic moment in *WATSONVILLE ON STRIKE* that gives a chilling sense to the limits of the official Teamster vision, commitment and integrity. Following the final vote to accept the new contract, a television reporter asks Teamster leader Lopez what made the difference in the strike. After all the months of struggle and solidarity among his rank-and-file, Lopez responds without any sense of irony, "The new owner."

"But what about the workers?" the reporter asks back. "Didn't they make a difference, too?"

Appearing almost repelled by the thought, Lopez pulls away from the camera. "Of course, of course," he shrugs. Cut and wrap. The workers may have been radicalized by it all, but the Teamster leadership is still in the back pocket of the bosses.

It should be noted that *WATSONVILLE ON STRIKE* has been attacked by some of the moderate activists in the struggle who attached themselves to Lopez, but given filmmaker Silver's close allegiance to the views of TDU radicals, this should come as no surprise. Still another critic has argued that the film's "self-referential" context crossed over into "self-indulgence" on the part of the filmmaker, particularly in a sequence in which Silver is arrested and brought to trial for "failure to disperse." I think the problem with this segment of the film is not that it's self-referential, but that it's structurally and textually distracting. In other words, it takes the flow of the storyline away from the cannery workers, while failing to place the filmmaker's arrest in a context of analyzing the role of the mainstream media in covering the strike. In fact, *WATSONVILLE ON STRIKE* relies on the mainstream media (newspaper headlines and clips from the local TV news stations) to tell this particular part of the story. To show himself being arrested and tried was not to "display process," but to engage in autobiography. In the words of film theorist Jay Ruby, Silver is "being reflective without being

reflexive."[6]

The one substantial textual flaw in *WATSONVILLE ON STRIKE* is one that is often present in radical documentaries and represents a tactical problem for all left filmmakers, Michael Moore's *ROGER & ME* notwithstanding. As Bill Nichols has pointed out, documentary works must display the "corpus,"[7] — that is, the "real social actors of whose historical engagement they speak." Silver's manifest partisanship prevented him from being granted an interview with one of the key players in the strike, Watsonville Canning owner Mort Console. While *WATSONVILLE ON STRIKE* does include a fairly bland and unrevealing interview with cannery owner Richard Shaw, Console is never even named in the film, nor do we see his image. By failing to include Console, the film misses out on Dziga Vertov's notion of cinematic dialectic[8] and, as a result, is forced to rely on less-compelling narrative. The inherent contradictions in the canning industry's relations of production are not nearly as dramatic and drawn out as they might have been.

The trade-off, of course, is that Silver's close relationship with the strikers allowed him to obtain the kind of footage that ultimately makes *WATSONVILLE ON STRIKE* as powerful as it is. Silver's great triumph is that he was there with his camera for virtually every major moment of the 19-month long struggle and that he provides an intimacy with the film's protagonists that is rare in the documentary tradition. This in itself is no small achievement and sets a mighty high standard for future documentaries of its genre.

NOTES

1. Jay Ruby notes that

"being reflexive means that the producer deliberately and intentionally reveals to his/her audience the underlying epistemological assumptions that caused him/her to formulate a set of questions in a particular way, to seek answers to those questions in a particular way, and finally to present those findings in a particular way." Jay Ruby, "The Image Mirrored: Reflexivity and the Documentary Film," *New Challenges for the Documentary*, ed. Alan Rosenthal (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1988), p. 65

2. Silver is a member of a leftist, community-based organization in Watsonville called the Migrant Media Education Project. The group played an active support role in the strike and was loosely affiliated with members of the Watsonville Teamsters for A Democratic Union (TDU). Silver, who is bilingual, also works as a video producer at the University of California at Santa Cruz.

3. For a more thorough historical and theoretical analysis of the strike see Frank Bardacke, "Watsonville: A Mexican Community On Strike," *The Year Left — 1988*, ed. Mike Davis (Verso: New York, 1988), pp. 149-182. Bardacke was one of the founding members of Watsonville TDU.

4. A Mexican-Catholic religious ceremony in which one walks on one's knees a great distance to a church or altar.

5. See Chuck Kleinhans, "Forms, Politics, Makers, and Contexts: Basic Issues for a

Theory of Radical Political Documentary," *Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetic of the Committed Documentary*, ed. Thomas Waugh (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1984), pp. 318-342.

6. Ruby, op cit., p.66

7. Bill Nichols, "History, Myth, and Narrative in Documentary," *Film Quarterly* (Fall 1987), p. 9.

8. See "The Vertov Papers," *Film Comment* 8 (Spring 1972), pp. 42-61.

Distributor — WATSONVILLE ON STRIKE, Migrant Media Productions, PO Box 2048, Freedom, CA 95019. 408-728-8949.

[To top](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The last word Arts censorship

by the editors

from *Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, pp. 122-123

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1990, 2006

As we move into the 1990s, it's more and more apparent that political struggle in the cultural area is heating up. Politicians get worked up mightily and get a lot of press mileage out of "flag desecration" rhetoric aimed at flag burning political protestors and artists who mock the sacred symbol. With a push for a Constitutional amendment, Congress tries to slap the Supreme Court's determination that flag burning is a form of protected free speech. And in yet another demonstration of the U.S. truism that commerce holds a higher priority than patriotism, no one mentions Old Glory used to highlight used car lots, 40x60 foot versions heralding car washes, or dirty and tattered ensigns flying at corporation sites.

Censorship in the art world again becomes a big issue, with the National Endowment for the Arts at the center of controversy. The Mapplethorpe and Serrano photos and exhibits were just the start of a witch hunt by conservatives eager to ferret out ideological and sexual deviation in directly and indirectly funded government art programs. Of course, this is nothing new. Political repression of art has a long history, which includes notable cases such as the destruction of Diego Rivera's murals in Rockefeller Center in the 30s, and specific blacklistings and the diffuse climate of repression of the McCarthy era. The Reagan presidency saw a gradual but decisive shift in many agencies such as the American Film Institute, National Endowment for the Humanities, Public Broadcasting System/Corporation for Public Broadcasting, as overt administrative intervention was used when needed to create a conservative mood. By the end of the decade it was not unusual to find bureaucrats openly remarking at grant writing workshops, "Of course, we don't fund anything political."

The keep-on-begging grant system for media projects extends government surveillance of projects as a bit of money appears now and later (if one is good, a little more pops out — like food pellets in behavioral conditioning experiments). This method works to create an environment of self-censorship, which is vastly more suitable to the system than using the ax directly. The National Endowments were not set up as a response to a massive democratic demand that the state support the arts and humanities. Rather, they were foot dragging responses to the fact that other capitalist countries had entire ministries of culture which actively advanced national interests in the arts. And they have functioned, at least in part

and always significantly, as vehicles for social and political control (just as the education sector does, for example).

Because there are a few exceptions, people are often tempted to forget the rule: he who pays the piper calls the tune. The public sector of arts funding under capitalism will always be liable to ideological squeeze. Witness the self-constriction and mainstreaming of England's "alternative" Channel 4, originally viewed as a godsend by British left media people. Witness the almost total blackout of Palestinian views or sex-positive AIDS information on PBS, which manages to slot a few "controversial" works into its "Point of View" series long after the issues have been well covered in the mainstream media.

Given the situation we have, what is a viable radical position? Certainly radicals need to take a stand against censorship and insist on free expression as a basic right for everyone, including artists. But radicals also have to point out the amount of tacit restriction and self-censorship that a repressive climate encourages, and to argue for opening the field of discussion, the expansion of boundaries, the inclusion of more voices, and the articulation of expression by the stigmatized and dispossessed.

Radicals should take advantage of what can be received from the existing system of media funding. But they can hardly depend on being able to "rip off the system," at least not as a regular procedure. The system isn't totally stupid about its interests. And there is certainly a point at which the desire to get something out of the dominant funding bodies crosses the boundary of buying into its values and procedures.

Radicals must remain in charge of their own artistic production and must be able to produce even if the grant money isn't there. For media artists that's a big issue because so much media work demands big bucks. Videomaker and JUMP CUT editor, Sherry Milner argues convincingly for a thrifty approach:

"Although the strategy of five years of arduous fundraising in order to spend a year making a film or tape is understandable, the time lost seems more of a hardship than the lack of money. The ability to represent ideas or issues or events without the long lag between conception and execution extends to cheap media the great benefit of immediacy...Since it is not obliged to attract huge audiences, bargain media does not have to be nice, pleasant, or well-behaved. It doesn't have to sugar-coat its intentions. Throwing aside expectations about what media should look like or what it should say, bargain media can afford to be offensive and to encourage people to take sides. But overpriced media is obliged to be polite, to avoid too many risks, and to resist challenging assumptions. Overpriced art assumes consensus, cheap art assumes commitment."

("All That Glitters...", *The Independent*, Jan-Feb. 1987)

In the short term, artists and media people need to organize against censorship and funding cuts for art. But that must be accompanied by a clear analysis of the big picture, of the entire system. There's more to do than write letters and find supportive legislators. There's media to make that questions the priorities of the dominant system, that challenges the conservative agenda by presenting

alternative images and deviant narratives. And that kind of media will not get unlimited funding, no matter what the maker's previous track record.

In an insightful analysis of the censorship controversy Carole Vance observes,

"The fundamentalist attack on images and the art world must be recognized not as an improbable and silly outburst of Yahoo-ism, but as a systematic part of a rightwing political program to restore traditional social arrangements and reduce diversity. The right wing is deeply committed to symbolic politics, both in using symbols to mobilize public sentiment and in understanding that, because images do stand in for and motivate social change, the arena of representation is a real ground for struggle." ("The War on Culture," *Art in America*, Sept. 89)

Mounting an effective response calls for a politics that goes beyond free speech issues. A strategy encompassing the entire system of representation must be accompanied by diverse tactics which allow radical challenges to appear rapidly. Which is to say that radical media people have to call on their most powerful resource, one that is not handed out by granters: imagination.

[To top](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The last word World in change

by the editors

from *Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, pp. 123-24

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1990, 2006

Since the last issue of JUMP CUT appeared, enormous, unexpected, and even unimaginable changes have rocked the world. The communist governments in most of Eastern Europe have fallen, the iron curtain is down, and the Soviet Union itself in the throes of rapid social and political change. Nelson Mandela has been released by the South African government, which may now negotiate with the African National Congress. The Chinese government brutally put down a huge popular non-violent movement for democracy. And the Sandinista government suffered a stunning election defeat in Nicaragua.

What history will reveal as people work out new social and economic forms, nationally and globally, is what a new form of socialism might look like. We do not imagine that this new socialism will take shape without intense conflict and even bloodshed. In the United States, the changes in the communist world and in Nicaragua have produced a kind of gloating in the press and in the White House; the release of Mandela, a call for the ANC to abandon armed struggle; and the oppression in China, a short-lived and token call for economic sanctions. To listen to this version of historical events, communism is over, marxism is dead, and socialism has been swept into the dustbin of history.

A whole new territory of skilled but cheap labor and eager consumers has opened up. Consumerism seems to sweep the entire world as McDonalds opens in Moscow and businessmen rush to Eastern Europe. Yet the United States does not have the funds to prop up new economies. And the logic of capitalism itself is to produce the conditions for and also to try to thwart the development of socialism.

In the most literal sense, socialism is people's effort to defend themselves and to construct a more just society. It come from the analysis and struggles of all those marginalized and maimed by capitalism's drive for profit — a profit derived from extracting surplus value from workers' labor and from sacking the world's natural resources. Events in Eastern Europe and China have revealed serious problems with socialist and communist institutions and the entrenched bureaucracies running those countries. Yet the downfall or oppressive actions of communist governments has not changed the basic situation of the victims of capitalism and imperialism. We cannot forget the homeless people and crack addicts in the streets of our cities, the death squads in El Salvador, Guatemala, and the Philippines, the

Intifada in Palestine, or the poverty and starvation in Africa. We know that in the United States, racism, sexism, and homophobia remain firmly in place, claiming victims everyday. If inadequate historical models of socialism have fallen, it will be no victory to replace them with capitalism's versions of freedom and democracy — that is, with merely the expansion of consumerism and illusions of free choice.

What we have learned in this century is that the capitalist powers have been able to thwart the full development of socialism. What has ended is the first crude experiment in socialism that began in 1917 with the Russian revolution, the first phase in the struggle between socialism and capitalism. It remains to be seen whether or not the Soviet Union can reform itself and move forward as a socialist country. But we must also remember that from the moment of that first revolution, the United States and other capitalist countries conducted an active and multifaceted counterrevolution against socialism. That counterrevolution supported the White forces in the Russian civil war; it encouraged European fascism in Spain, Italy and Germany in the hope of defeating the Soviet Union; it fueled the Cold War and the arms race after World War II. It has opposed by force of arms trade union organizing in capitalist countries and every effort at social reform in "underdeveloped" areas of the world. Our government has directly or indirectly waged nearly constant warfare since 1945 — in Greece, China, Korea, Guatemala, Vietnam, Cuba, the Congo, the Dominican Republic, Chile, Angola, Lebanon, Grenada, and Panama.

Even though capitalism has been able to prevent the full development of socialism in every country that started down that path since 1917, the need for socialism and its ideals live on. We have learned many things from this experiment. These lessons have become part of our collective memory. Socialist revolutions have released enormous energies in all areas of human activity. The Soviet 1920s, the Cuban 1960s, and the Nicaraguan 1980s are three of the most creative moments in history since World War I. Socialist revolution empowers many strata of people whose abilities capitalism overlooks and wastes. The Russian revolution demonstrated that socialism could transform a backward, feudal, agricultural country into a world industrial country without producing the poverty and the gross economic inequalities found in capitalism. The cost was very high but no higher than in western capitalist countries built on wars, slave trade, and subjugation and annihilation of many million indigenous peoples. Revolutions in Cuba and Nicaragua have demonstrated that poor countries, without first becoming industrially developed and with little outside help, can drastically improve people's healthcare, nutrition, and education, especially by organizing at the base. If left alone and not fraught by constant efforts to overthrow it, socialism may well be capable of bringing about the changes that we claim it can.

For many of us who have worked for progressive causes in the United States, change seems slow in coming and regressive forces sometimes appear overwhelmingly strong. Yet recent history has shown that massive social and political changes can happen rapidly. It is exciting to think that the United States might change as fast as Eastern Europe recently has, yet it is hard for us to imagine that as a likelihood or even a realistic fantasy. Progressive change has always happened very slowly and painfully here. We live in a profoundly conservative society. If we look at the long development of the U.S. labor movement, the women's movements — first and second waves, and at the struggles of African

Americans first to throw off the bonds of slavery and now to struggle for the most basic human rights, we can get an idea of the slow pace and very high cost of the most basic social advances here.

But recent events in Eastern Europe should raise our spirits about the possibilities for change and teach us some basic lessons, too. Expectations for peace and disarmament are running high. People all over the world are willing to organize to guarantee that the environment is cleaned up and protected. Western European countries are moving rapidly toward some sort of European union with many strong social democratic and welfare aspects; most likely much of Eastern Europe will become integrated into that union. At the same time, our government has become increasingly more corrupt. In the United States, the gap widens between what the government does and represents and its citizens' needs and desires. Most visibly, the Iran-Contra gate, savings and loans, and HUD scandals reveal the government's secret actions that most citizens do not support.

For progressives in the United States, coalition politics may be the best way to work for change in the near future. We can draw a lesson again from Eastern Europe. Communists and non-communists alike have joined together to end bureaucratic structures out of touch with people's needs. In the United States, activists must also learn new ways to come together and join forces. For example, in many communities, coalitions of labor, church, and grassroots community groups are learning how to work together.

When joining together in such coalitions, it is crucial not to formulate and apply "least common denominator" politics, but actively to take up the needs and demands of the coalition's various sectors and especially to deal with issues of racism, class bias, sexism, and homophobia. For example, we know there are enormous differences in working styles and language among different members of a coalition, and such differences are often tied economic disparities (e.g., community groups may not have much money as labor unions do for organizing projects). Women, gays, blacks and latinos must be able to enter coalitions and not have to educate the others constantly about sexism and racism; the struggle against racism and sexism must be part of the theory and the organizing structure of a coalition as a whole, from the start of its organizing project.

If we want change, we have no choice but to come together and learn about each other's backgrounds and needs as we work together for a common goal. That may be difficult for many intellectuals and artists who cling to an ethic of individualism and who have bourgeois class status if not a high income. We value our individuality and like to keep a certain distance from committing ourselves to work with a large group for the sake of social action. And we may not like either the philosophy or style of larger organizations that may play a key role in such coalitions — often labor unions or church groups. Yet intellectuals and artists have crucial skills to contribute to organizing efforts. We know how to gather and summarize information, to write and analyze, and to make media and art that can move people's hearts and minds.

The lesson to be learned from the changes in Eastern Europe is that any leadership, no matter how progressive its goals, must constantly listen to its base and draw its strength from that base. It's a lesson that Mao Tse-Tung constantly reminded us of. All progressive social policy and institutions that purport to serve the people must

constantly return to ordinary people to ask about, listen to, and act upon people's needs. If this sounds idealistic, we have recent history to teach us how rapidly stagnant governments and institutions can fall. Those of us who can see and feel repelled by the abuses of our own government and other social and economic institutions here should take heart and have confidence in our ability to use our intellectual and artistic skills to work with others for the sake of large-scale social change.

[To top](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)